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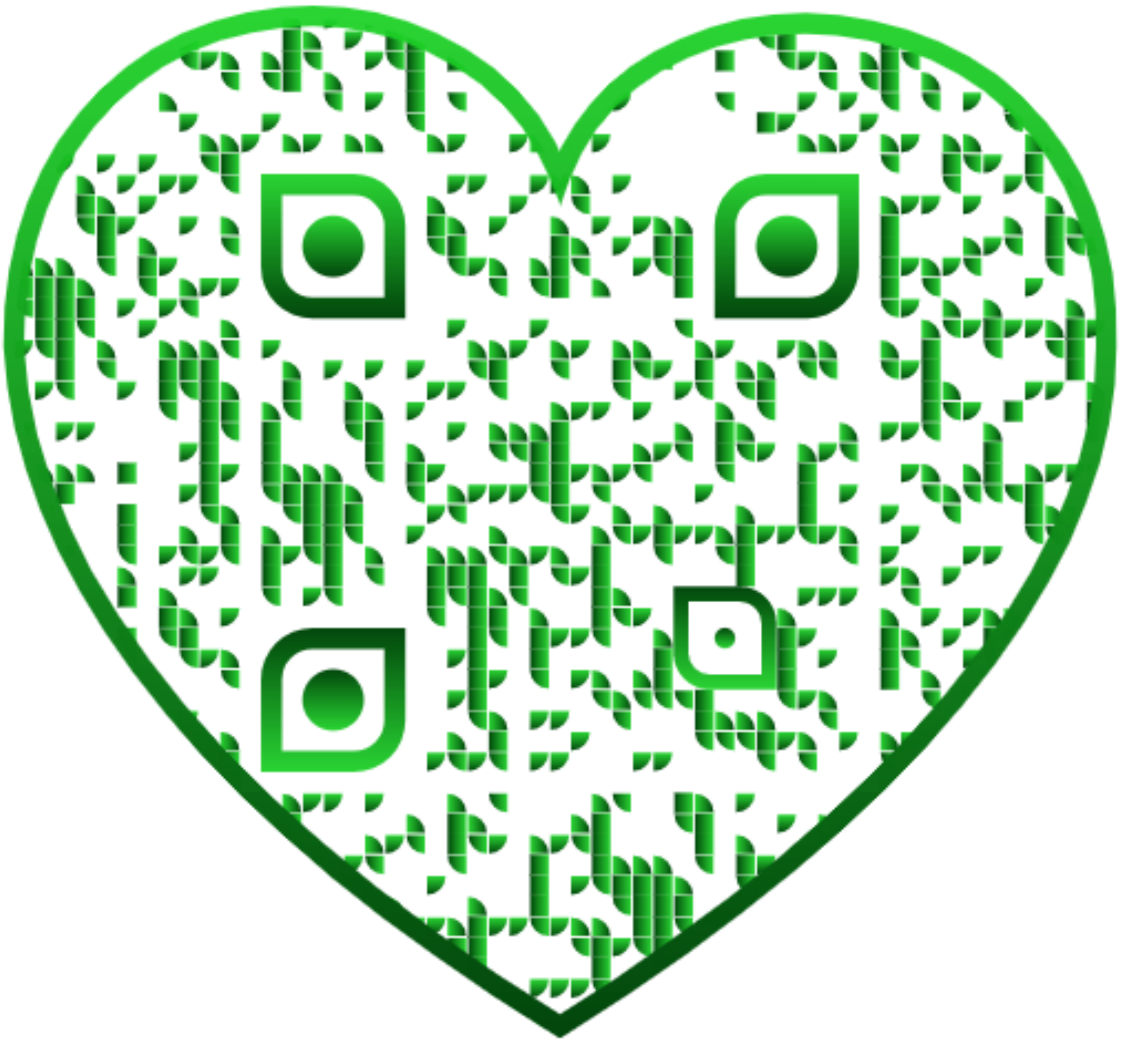

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MAGICO

AS WE SEE IT

BY JIM AUSTIN

THIS ISSUE: A series of unconsummated affairs.

AXPONA in the rear view

If buying a hi-fi product from an internet retailer is like an arranged marriage, a hi-fi show is like speed dating.

Not everyone, I realize, approaches hi-fi shows (or speed dating, for that matter) the same way, and anyway, the analogy between hi-fi and dating is far from perfect. Speed dating is how this year's AXPONA,[1] America's biggest hi-fi show, often felt to me as I moved from room to room. Every new system I heard had the potential to become a long-term relationship. Could I live with this one forever?

It may seem strange to be so passionate about something as pedestrian as consumer electronics—to equate commerce to romantic relationships—but to me, that kind of affection is the essence of our hobby. I would not want to own a system I didn't love.

Whether you truly buy this or not—but especially if you do—anticipating a long-term relationship is a good way to approach a hi-fi show. It focuses the ear and mind on what really matters—*to you*. You're not judging ultimate quality, checking off qualities on a list. You're judging the possibility of pleasure plus compatibility: "She may not be classically beautiful; I just love her laugh."

Some romantic notions should surely be cast aside. My wife auditioned me for eight years before we got married, as I auditioned her, and we are still together. But does our success in love mean that it was meant to be? To believe so is to close your mind. While there are certain qualities I would always want in a partner, I could be happy with others, with very different qualities—or at least I think I could.

If you approach every room as a possible long-term commitment, a show can be exhausting. Add to that the responsibilities of being *Stereophile*'s editor—magazine production must continue as I scout new musical partners—and there's a limit to how many rooms I can visit over the course of a show. Among those rooms I made it to—perhaps 15% of the total—I did not encounter a system that set me searching for a Las Vegas–style wedding chapel, but I did encounter several that would warrant further investigation if I were on the market—*and* if cost were no object.

What did I hear at AXPONA that qualified? A big room hosted by Aldo Filippelli, proprietor of high-end distributor Luxury Audio Group, featured a pair of Estelon Forza loudspeakers in a gorgeous finish (called Violet Night, which I first read as *Violent* Night). Amplification was a pair of Vitus Audio SM-103 Mk.II monoblocks; in fact, all the electronics were by Vitus, except for the music server, which was an Innuos Statement. Cabling was from Crystal Cable's Art Da Vinci series, except for the power cords, which were Crystal Cable Infinity, in a worldwide debut.

This big system could massage your body with air on EDM music, but it also impressed with subtlety. Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* is an obvious (which is to say, not so interesting) choice for a hi-fi demo, but the version played here was conducted by Bernstein, not by some no-name conductor on a hi-fi label. The scale and foundation were sturdy and large; I heard a whole concert hall. You'd need a big budget and a big room to pull this off at home.

The big room hosted by Rutherford Audio employed a brand I'd never heard, Britain's Stratton Acoustics. Two Stratton models alternated; the most notable to me were the big, wide Elypsis 1512s. Electronics were by Accustic Arts (Mono VI amplifiers; Tube Pre V preamplifier, the Power V integrated) and an Antipodes Oladra server. The room held turntables from Analog Signature (the Montana Neo) and Vertere (the RG-1), which alternated. As Saturday drew to a close, I chose an early pressing of Deep Purple's *Machine Head* from a batch of LPs and requested "Smoke on the Water." Sitting in the front row, the pressure I felt on my chest could have pushed a good-sized sailboat along Lake Geneva, let alone dissipate some smoke. This system, too, would require a big budget and room.

For the second straight year, the system with big Stenheim Ultime Two SX speakers, now with their new Reference platforms, biwired with four VTL MB-185 Series II Signature monoblocks, sounded superb. The preamp was also VTL, and the digital source was a dCS Rossini APEX DAC/Clock. Several fine LPs were spun—by Bea Lamm, always a treat—on a VPI Titan Direct 'table with a Lyra Etna λ Lambda cartridge. This was another big system, in a big room, that was capable of warm, imtimate sounds and music.

At a more suitable domestic scale, I very much enjoyed the Bel Canto room with that company's "Black" amplification system, YG Peaks Ascent speakers, and a Pure Fidelity Harmony turntable. Cabling was Cardas Clear Beyond. Though hardly inexpensive, this system would work well in a modest-sized room—indeed it *did* work in a regular hotel room. The Bel Canto system digitizes all its inputs, including phono (though RIAA correction is in the analog domain), yet the character of the LP playback was retained. Listening was relaxing and enjoyable.

Also worth a mention: the Harmonia Distribution rooms, particularly the one with Fyne Audio's F703SP loudspeakers—a compromise between that company's old-school aesthetics and approach and something a bit more modern: Fyne's big coaxial driver in a beautiful wood cabinet with a modern teardrop-tower shape. With PrimaLuna's new hybrid integrated amplifier, this system offered the woody warmth of those traditional wood-furniture loudspeaker designs but without the image diffuseness some such systems display. Warm and pleasant but also incisive.

Please don't mistake this for a best-of-show report, since, as I already wrote, I heard only a fraction of the systems on active display at the show. How could *anyone* hear everything? Spending a mere 10 minutes in each room, it would have taken just shy of 34 hours—more hours than the show was open—not counting time spent waiting for the elevator, and you'd miss the Exhibition Hall and the Ear Gear Experience, not to mention lunch. The message I'd like to convey is, if you have a chance to visit a show like AXPONA, you should do it, even if it requires a drive or getting on a plane. Then ask yourself, in every room, if you could live with the sound long-term. A committed approach can be exhausting, but it will pay you back eventually in emotional involvement in the music. ■

1 See our online coverage at stereophile.com/category/axpona-2024.

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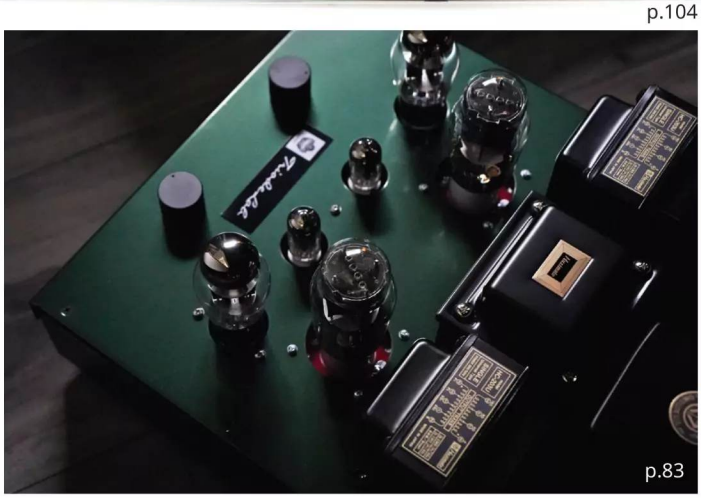
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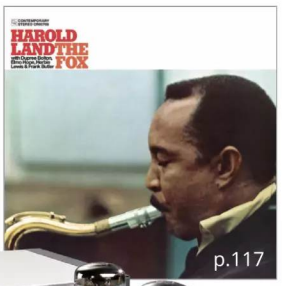

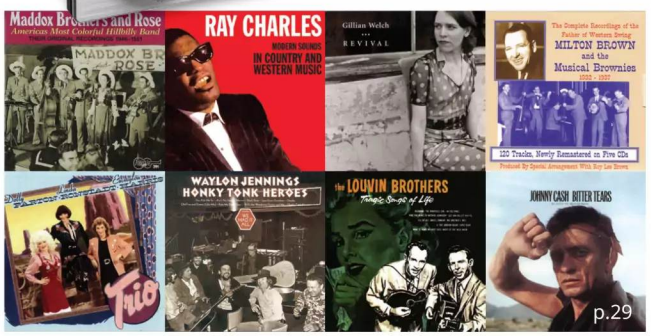

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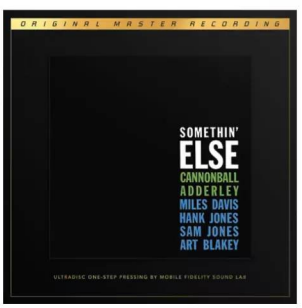

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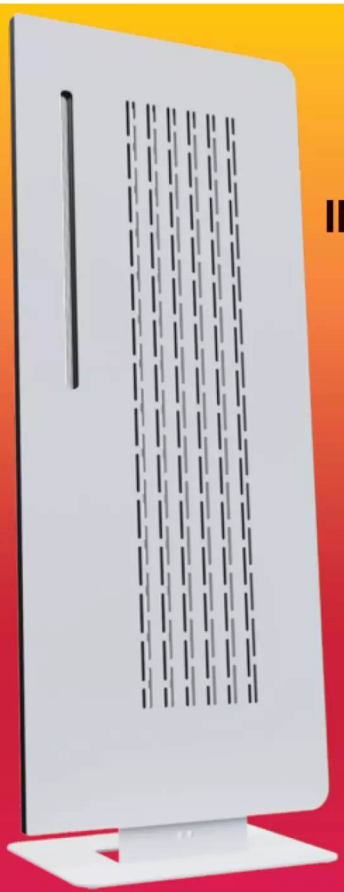

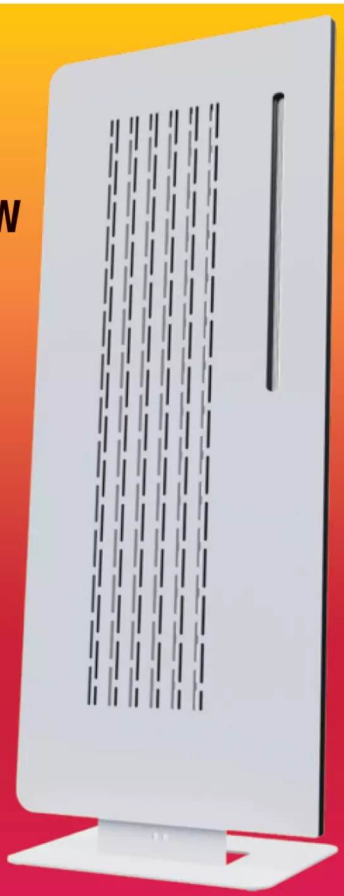

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LETTERS FEEDBACK TO THE EDITOR

TAKE HEED! Unless marked otherwise, all letters to the magazine and its writers are assumed to be for possible publication. Please include your name and physical address. We reserve the right to edit for length and content.

Stereophile's hunky reviewers

Kudos once again on your great magazine and fantastic staff of writers and equipment reviewers. A question comes to mind, however: Do your reviewers lift weights in their spare time or moonlight as furniture movers? How did Brian Damkroger and Sasha Matson manage to move the heavy floorstanders they reviewed in the May '24 issue, and in Sasha's case, move them upstairs?

Congratulations on your well-written, entertaining, and informative publication!

Lloyd Alterman,
South Orange, New Jersey

Mr. Alterman, thanks for your kind note. It pleases me to know that you enjoy Stereophile. *The answer to your question is simple: In addition to being knowledgeable, discerning, and exceptionally good looking, we are also very strong. And if you don't believe that, how about this: through a combination of determination and resourcefulness, it somehow gets done. It helps that we love what we do.*

Occasionally, a company will send out a staff member to assist with the installation. Sometimes they'll send over someone from a nearby dealership. More often, writers solicit assistance from friends and colleagues, wives and larger children. Rarely, we hire local labor. If none of that works, we manage. We get it done somehow.

I'm still not sure how I got a 140lb amplifier in the box some months ago, alone. When Wilson Audio Specialties sent the Alexx Vs to me to review, the delivery truck arrived without essential moving tools, so I held my breath as the driver, his strong assistant, and a stronger representative from the local Wilson dealership pushed the speaker's very heavy bottom cabinet on casters up four steps, on a creaking, cracking ramp assembled on-site from disassembled crates. It was touch and go.—**Jim Austin**

Quad

I enjoyed Tom Fine's article about the rebirth of quad. Long ago, I bought quad LPs and played them through my Sony Decoder (which I still have) and an Electro-Voice QQS decoder I picked up at Radio Shack for $5 in 1973.

One error I caught: Mobile Fidelity did not issue the DTS-encoded Wings CDs. According to Discogs, they were issued by DTS Entertainment in the late 1990s. As one who was alive in the 1970s, I do not recall the Wings ever being issued in any form of quad sound at that time: The DTS issues were the first multichannel issues of the material. Also, other quad LPs have been reissued in Japan besides the Sony 7" series (which are great); I would suggest the SACD issues of Tomita material from Japan, on the Denon label, called "Ultimate Edition": re, the *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the Debussy, and *The Planets*.

Richard J. Koloda
Cleveland, Ohio

Mr. Koloda, thank you for your informative letter. Regarding those DTS CDs from the 1990s: That release of Band on the Run *was, quoting the back label, "Manufactured for Mobile Fidelity International." Mobile Fidelity International released some early recordings by MoFi founder Brad Miller. The cover of the 2001 DTS version does not contain similar language, but it* does *carry the label "HDS," for "High Definition Surround." HDS discs come from Miller Nevada Ltd., a company Brad Miller owned.*

Band on the Run *was available on quad 8-track as early as 1974. I'm not sure about quad LPs, but probably not.*—**Jim Austin**

Hospital grade

Having worked as an electrician for several years, it irks me when one of your reviewers mentions hospital-grade outlets in their list of accessories. Unless you like the color orange, you're wasting money. There is no performance benefit to using a hospital-grade outlet. They are designed to be safer by incorporating two ground wires, one sheathed and one bare (usually aluminum). The green-sheathed wire ground goes to the metal box and the outlet, while the unsheathed ground connects only to the box. A hospital-grade outlet is also self-grounding, meaning that it is grounded as long as it is screwed into a grounded metal box. With the normal ground wire attached to the outlet, it is effectively double grounded.

Dave Davey

Mr. Davey, I suspect many audiophiles buy hospital-grade receptacles simply hoping that they'll be better than the box-store stuff without the steep price tag of "audiophile-grade." I'm putting that in quotes because there's no official standard for it, though UL—Underwriters Laboratories—started setting standards for radios in 1928.

Are hospital-grade receptacles meaningfully better? "Hospital grade" criteria are indeed determined by UL. To make the grade, receptacles must meet the same safety requirements as other UL-listed receptacles. They "incorporate additional construction features and are subjected to other performance requirements" including "grounding reliability, assembly integrity, strength and durability tests." Not much detail there, but it's more than just grounding, and it's enough to make me think they're worth a look and listen. If they do nothing more than hold the prongs of a stiff, heavy power cord a little tighter than an outlet from Lowe's, I'll be happy.

And by the way, hospital-grade receptacles don't have to be orange and usually aren't. Just look for a small green dot. If instead it has an orange triangle, I learned, that means it's an "isolated ground" receptacle, which sounds like it's opposite to hospital grade. On those outlets, the grounding terminal is insulated from its metal mounting yoke. It's an effort to reduce electrical noise, but they must be installed correctly to avoid becoming a safety hazard.—**Jim Austin**

The Silence of the Angels

I wanted to express my appreciation for your review of the Silent Angel Bonn NX network switch in the May 2024 issue. I have what for me is a very fine audio system, but as you wrote, its total value makes this $4000 addition a poor investment. Nevertheless, I'm interested in the issues you wrote about, and I appreciated your evenhanded approach.

An amazing amount of time, it seems, is spent arguing over what is "snake oil" and what is not. If one is interested in such a product, listening with one's own ears is the best course. I see no need to criticize those who hear differences that I may not. We're all free to walk away.

Geoff Mirelowitz
Seattle, Washington

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INDUSTRY UPDATE

AUDIO NEWS & VIEWS

SUBMISSIONS: Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should email the when, where, and who to stletters@stereophile.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the October 2024 issue is July 20, 2024.

REMEMBERING ANDREW SINGER

Michael Trei

Andrew N. Singer, founder and owner of New York City high-end audio retailer Sound By Singer, died Sunday, April 21, 2024, following a lengthy illness. He was 73 years old.

Born and raised in New York City by a Jewish father and a French mother, Andy did what any good Jewish kid would do to please his parents: got a law degree and went to work for a prestigious New York City law firm. All went well at first, but after about three years he came to realize that the legal profession bored him to tears. Switching gears, he decided to follow his real passions—music, audio equipment, and building audio systems—and established Sound By Singer in 1978 in the living room of his parents' Manhattan apartment.

Within a couple of years, it became clear that having a constant stream of people coming into the family living room wasn't a good long-term solution, so Sound By Singer moved to a real commercial location. Before long, during the 1980s, the business outgrew that space and moved on to a succession of larger spaces. Finally, in 1990, Singer settled in for the long haul at 18 East 16th Street—just as the neighborhood, Union Square, was becoming hip. This massive, custom-built store featured

10 dedicated listening rooms brimming with state-of-the-art audio gear, cementing Singer's reputation as a powerhouse in high-end audio retail.

In the 1980s, New York's high-end retail scene could be cutthroat. Singer had a brilliant ability to skillfully negotiate the obstacle course, taking on newer brands he believed showed promise, then working to build that brand's reputation and profile nationally and internationally. Brands including Krell, Apogee, Snell, Roksan, Wilson Audio Specialties, and Vandersteen benefitted greatly from the attention.

Business boomed for years. Eventually, the brutal New York City commercial real estate market took its toll. In 2010, facing a 35% rent hike, Andy decided it was time to downsize. He eventually opened a new, by-appointment-only location on 27th Street, across from the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT).

With the pressure to keep the big 16th Street store afloat off his back, Andy became happier and more relaxed.

Andy's secret weapon for brand building was passion. He never lost his deep passion for music, audio, and system building. If he believed in a product, he would make sure all his customers knew about it too.

This continued right up to the end. Andy would get giddy about a new piece of gear he had acquired and would excitedly demand I make the 45-minute drive up to his home immediately, so that we could install, tweak, and evaluate the latest turntables, tonearms, cartridges, and phono preamps together. Although he sold digital components, at home, Andy's listening was strictly analog. In 38 years, I don't think I ever saw him playing anything other than a vinyl record for his own listening pleasure.

Beyond audio, Andy had a deep passion for US history; he knew more about the Civil War than many historians. In his listening room, he had a table where he would reenact Civil War battles using hundreds of tin soldiers. In a nearby room, he had a collection of uniforms, weapons, and artifacts that would have been the pride of

CALENDAR OF INDUSTRY EVENTS

ATTENTION ALL AUDIO SOCIETIES: We have a page on the *Stereophile* website devoted to you: stereophile.com/audiophile-societies. If you'd like to have your audio-society information posted on the site, email Chris Vogel at vgl@cfl.rr.com. (Please note the new email address.)

It is inappropriate for a retailer to promote a new product line in "Calendar" unless it is associated with a seminar or similar event.

CALIFORNIA

■ Friday evenings, 5–7pm PST: The San Francisco Audiophile Society hosts a virtual happy hour via Zoom, open to anyone who'd like to join us to talk about hi-fi and whatever else is on your mind. For more information and registration, visit bit.ly/3RyaqX9.

NEVADA

■ January 10–12, 2025: Save the dates for the inaugural Las Vegas edition of T.H.E. Show, which will take place at a multicampus venue yet to be announced. For more information, visit theshownow.com.

NEW YORK

■ June 20, 2024, 6pm: Entertainment Technology is having an "Unveiling" event for the 75th anniversary of McIntosh and SME and the 50th anniversary of Wilson Audio Specialties. There will be demonstrations of electronics from McIntosh's 75th year collection including the MC2.1KW Reference monoblock power amplifier, C12000 Solid State/Vacuum Tube preamplifier, MA12000 integrated amplifier, and MCD12000 SACD/CD Player. All this equipment will be presented on Harmonic Resolution Systems audio racks.

Alongside this equipment will be the rare SME Model 60 record player in a McIntosh Blue finish, a one-of-a-kind piece. For loudspeakers, the focus will be on the Wilson Alexia V, also in "McIntosh Blue"; these will be available exclusively at Entertainment Technology. The event's equipment will be connected with Nordost Valhalla Cables. There will be previews of the DCS Rossini Apex DAC/Music Streamer/CD Player and the Audio Research Reference Phono 3 Vacuum Tube Phono Preamplifier. Representatives of these companies will attend. The event is invitation only, with limited first-come, first-serve spaces available. Call (914) 242-8881 to schedule a private demo. For more information, visit etaudiovideo.com.

any Civil War museum. His vacations were often spent visiting Civil War battlefields in the South.

For me, losing Andy leaves a massive void. I, like many familiar faces in the audio world, got my start at Sound By Singer. I am deeply grateful to have been able to call him a friend and mentor for most of my working life. He will be greatly missed.

IN MEMORIAM: MILAN KARAN

Stereophile Staff

Milan Karan, owner, CEO, and chief designer of Serbian hi-fi manufacturer Karan Acoustics, passed away on April 11, 2024, at age 59. Wynn Wong, North American distributor for Karan Acoustics, provided the following statement:

> Milan Karan has passed away after battling a serious illness, primarily affecting his liver. His son, Emil Karan, will now be overseeing the business operations, maintaining its continuity as before. Emil has been an integral part of the business for over eight years, working closely alongside Milan. Therefore, the transition is expected to be seamless, especially considering Emil's increasing responsibilities during the latter stages of Milan's illness. The business will continue to operate under Emil's capable supervision, ensuring its smooth continuation.

Karan got his start in electronics in his hometown of Novi Sad, Serbia, working in the medical devices field, creating audio electronics in his spare time. Listeners were impressed by what they heard, so he created Karan Acoustics in 1986. Karan Acoustics products became known for their musicality, style, and no-compromise designs.

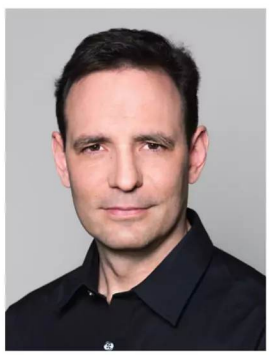
Stereophile was rather late to the Karan Acoustics party. Our first review of a Karan product was of the Karan Acoustics Master Collection POWERa Mono; reviewing it in the May 2023 issue, Jason Victor Serinus called the amplifier "a phenomenal achievement." You can read Jason's review at bit.ly/KaranPowera.

CH PRECISION ACQUIRES WATTSON AUDIO

Julie Mullins

CH Precision, the Swiss manufacturer of high-end audio electronics, recently announced in a press release their acquisition of another Swiss audio company, Wattson Audio. Wattson entered the hi-fi market about four years ago, releasing the Emerson streamer in both analog and digital versions. The company's founders, though, have been in the industry for 20-plus years, having honed their tech expertise at the Switzerland-based Engineered SA company, which supplies a range of services to high-end audio manufacturers with a focus on digital interfaces and DSP.

The acquisition includes the Wattson Audio brand, assets, streaming products and solutions, and engineers. "By incorporating Wattson Audio's engineering team and products under the CH umbrella, we create an even greater concentration of audio design and engineering talent," CH Precision CEO Florian Cossy (right) said, quoted in the release. "It also opens a tremendous range of new market opportunities in which to apply our combined experience and technologies."



There's more to the story, as the press release explains. Cossy, who's also an electronics designer, first worked with Wattson's Alexandre Lavanchy (left) in 2004, when Lavanchy joined ABC PCB, the high-end audio design consultancy Cossy founded a year earlier. Lavanchy assumed the consultancy role when Cossy left the company to form CH Precision, in 2009. In 2015, Lavanchy changed ABC PCB's name to Engineered SA. Quoted in the press release, Lavanchy said that it was great to be working closely with Cossy and the CH Precision team again. A rebranded Wattson Audio is expected to introduce new products at High End Munich, along with "a few surprises."

AUDIO ADVICE EXPANDS, ADDS STAFF

Julie Mullins

Raleigh, North Carolina–based Audio Advice announced new hires to their leadership team and plans for geographic expansion. The hi-fi, home theater, and custom-install dealership added Gregg Chopper as chief operating officer (COO). Alex Borrero will become general manager of the Raleigh dealership. Jim Williamson will take on a new role as chief of staff and systems; his duties include hiring across markets and functions including sales, operations, and tech positions, plus other HR duties and technology responsibilities. Borrero previously worked with Best Buy and Magnolia Design Centers. Quoted in the release, Chopper said, "Alex oversaw the rollout of multiple Magnolia Design Centers across the Southeast and has a terrific reputation."

Williamson joined Audio Advice 16 years ago when AA acquired his company, Innovation Systems. Chopper is focusing his energies on "potential acquisition candidates in additional markets."

Audio Advice operates two brick-and-mortar showrooms, in Raleigh and Charlotte, a retail website, and a hi-fi/home theater show held annually in Raleigh called Audio Advice Live. (See the Calendar of Industry Events for details.)

VERITY AUDIO CLOSES

Julie Mullins

Stereophile recently learned that Verity Audio of Quebec City, Canada, has closed after three decades in business. "After years of crafting exceptional loudspeakers and electronics, and bringing unparalleled auditory experiences to a global clientele, Verity Audio will be ceasing operations," says a post on the company's Facebook page. "It is with a blend of solemnity and pride that Verity Audio announces the end of a remarkable journey in the world of high-fidelity audio production. ... We are deeply grateful to our loyal customers, dedicated distributors, and everyone who has been part of the Verity Audio family. Your support and belief in our products have been the driving force behind our success. We take immense pride in what we have achieved together and the joy we have brought to audiophiles around the world.

"Verity Audio's legacy will not be measured solely by the products we created but also by the experiences we shared and the standards we set in the audio industry.

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As we close this chapter, we look forward to seeing how our shared passion for high-quality audio continues to resonate in the industry and in the homes of our customers."

Founded by Julien Pelchat and Bruno Bouchard, Verity's technically innovative, contemporary designs were available in vivid colors not commonly seen on high-end equipment. The company's first product was the Parsifal loudspeaker, introduced in 1995. Over the years, *Stereophile* has reviewed several Verity products including the Rienzi, Sarastro, and Sarastro II loudspeakers, the Montsalvat Amp60 power amplifier, and the Montsalvat DAC/PRE D/A processor.

According to the announcement, Verity's Facebook page "will remain active for some time to enable customers to share their experiences or ask questions." Verity's website will also "continue to operate, providing access to documents and information."

"Thanks for your continued support of Verity Audio. Please don't hesitate to reach out for further assistance or information."

AUDIO SHOW CONFUSION

Stereophile Staff

Earlier this year, the Chester Group, the company behind the New York Audio Show (NYAS) and several other shows, pulled information about the NYAS from its website, then, several weeks later, announced that it is seeking a new venue outside Manhattan. "There is simply no way that this show can be continuously hosted in NYC, due to extremely high venue costs, unworkable venue guarantees, demanding unions, and yes high attendance costs for both exhibitors and visitors," the announcement said.

A statement on the Chester Group's website says, "the New York Audio Show will become a smaller, more bespoke type of event and will be limited to 30 market leading brands; it will be held outside of Manhattan at a Venue that has ample free parking, great ambience, and greatly improved accessibility for everyone involved, and yes and most importantly mostly Meeting Rooms."

Meanwhile, in late March the Chester Group announced the introduction of a new audio show to be held in Los Angeles starting in January 2025, at the Hilton Orange County Costa Mesa Hotel, in collaboration with the Los Angeles and Orange County Audiophile Society. After pushback from the industry—particularly over the conflict with the existing T.H.E. show, scheduled for June at the same venue—the Chester Group announced that their new show would not go forward after all, explaining that they planned the new show only after hearing, erroneously, that the T.H.E. show SoCal would not be taking place. Upon being informed that T.H.E. Show SoCal would indeed happen, plans for the new L.A. show were scrapped.

SONUS FABER INTRODUCES AN EXTREME LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

Julie Mullins

Vicenza, Italy–based loudspeaker manufacturer Sonus Faber recently announced the launch of their highest-end loudspeaker yet, coinciding with the company's 40th anniversary.

In recent years—especially since 2019, when the company expanded their in-house sound lab—Sonus Faber has said it is shifting toward a more neutral sound. Because wood—an integral part of the company's history and heritage—inherently has resonances, hence a characteristic sound, some changes were called for. Sonus Faber acquired the De Santi woodworking factory, their 35-plus-year cabinet-making partner, also based in Vicenza. They hired some new design engineers, including younger talent from within the industry. "The company puts their trust in young minds," marketing coordinator Lorenzo Valè said, adding that the age of the average employee had dropped as their R&D team and in-house capabilities expanded. *Stereophile* spoke to several members of the team during a factory visit.

Some of Sonus Faber's designers have experience in the pro audio world. One brought to the Suprema project 16 years of experience designing large, high-efficiency studio monitors; he redesigned Suprema drivers for refinement and power.

Sonus Faber relies heavily on measurements, Finite Element simulations, and other science-based engineering techniques—yet "the human part of the development is still the most important: listening by ear," said Florian Marmisse, one of the young engineers leading the department.

The Suprema loudspeaker system, called the 2.2, is hand-built. It consists of four columns and an active external analog crossover; a 2.1 version, with a single subwoofer cabinet, is available at a slightly lower cost.

The new speaker system incorporates acoustic and design elements derived from other models from Sonus Faber's history, Valè explained, now taken to the maximum. The main tower is a 4.5-way. Its lute shape is borrowed from Sonus Faber's first Guarneri speakers. The subwoofer cabinets embody the elliptical shape seen in the company's Stradivari speakers. In the Sonus Faber tradition, Italian leather lines their front baffle, but on the Suprema speakers, it's top-tier, handcrafted leather from Poltrona Frau, an Italian luxury furniture brand. The Suprema speakers are made to order, so the customer chooses the color (and wood finish). The wood in the Supremas is a maple that's specific to northern Italy, said to be the best wood for violin making. Other Suprema materials include carbon fiber, cork (used for damping in the midrange chamber), and a secret new material.

The main towers' sealed cabinets house a 20mm supertweeter and 38mm tweeter, both silk domes, each with its own waveguide, both positioned above a 6.5" midrange. An 8" midwoofer and four 8"

woofers—two above and two below—complete the array on front. Firing toward the rear are a 28mm silk-dome tweeter and a 4" paper-cone midrange; these can be turned on or off.

The sealed-cabinet subwoofer is passive. Its pair of 38cm (11") woofers use carbon fiber sandwich cones and deliver bass and sub-bass from 16Hz to between 30 and 80Hz, depending on the external crossover settings.

The full, four-tower system is said to have a frequency response ranging from 16Hz to 14kHz. Both the towers and the subwoofer enclosures are spec'd to be a 4 ohm load, with sensitivity of 91dB/2.83V/m for the towers and 92dB for the subs.

In the US, the built-to-order Suprema 2.2 system costs $750,000. That price includes travel to the factory to select leather and wood finishes.

CANTON LAUNCHES A NEW REFERENCE LOUDSPEAKER

Jim Austin

German loudspeaker manufacturer Canton has launched a new reference speaker, the Reference GS. "In over 50 years of company history, never before has a Canton loudspeaker been developed and manufactured with this level of complexity," the company said in a press release. "The designers of the Reference GS harmoniously combine elements of wood, metal and lacquer to create an irresistible work of art."

Each Reference GS stands 64" tall, 18" wide, and 28" deep, and weighs 340lb. The cabinet's "elaborately curved" side panels are made from 1"-thick wood laminate, ensuring a stable, nonresonant structure. The front baffle is rounded—a first for Canton—and a full 3" thick. They're manufactured on a "special 5-axis CNC milling machine. ... Internal standing waves are prevented by careful selection of the front shape, baffle and, a precisely defined damping material made of a special fleece." The cabinet is sealed; in fact, special gaskets are employed—Canton calls them "sealing rings"—to keep the air inside and "reduce the transmission of structure-borne vibrations." Used in combination with included absorbers, a new base plate is said to "almost completely decouple the speaker from the floor."

For the first time, Canton is using a diamond dome tweeter. The bass level is adjustable in 1.5dB steps—this in addition to the midrange and treble level controls found on other Canton Reference-series speakers.

The Reference GS is a limited-edition speaker; only 50 pairs will be made. US retail price is $60,000. The warranty is 10 years. ■

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GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: Harbeth's P3ESR XD with the Nelson speaker stand/woofer.

Harbeths standing tall

After lifelike timbres and speed-train momentum, how a loudspeaker projects its energy into my room is the main thing that determines how my sound system *feels* as I listen to it. When I review loudspeakers, I try to notice the unique tone and force of their "voice" as they speak into my room. Do they stand too close, stick out their chests, and brag loudly in third harmonics? Or do they have small voices that force me to lean in to make out what they're saying?

With a miniature box speaker like my reference Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5as or the similarly sized Harbeth P3ESR XDs, which I'm auditioning this month, I have to sit very close to experience any of their direct, "off-the-cone" energy. If my listening position gets too far away or the speakers are positioned too far apart or too far from the wall behind them, the sound thins and loses body.

I didn't need to sit close to those 1947 Altec A5 Voice of the Theatre horns I used to use. Their energy came out straight ahead and touched every corner of even a big room. Like they did in a movie theater.

In maximum contrast, each of my 83dB/W/m–sensitive LS3/5a's piston about 15 square inches of air. The 100+dB–sensitive A5 Altecs projected sound from about 1500 square inches of driver area. That's a sandbox shovel vs a snowplow.

To check that metaphor, consider that the soundboard of a Steinway A piano—a small grand—measures 2129 square inches;[1] the whole piano might be emitting sound energy from 5000 square inches or more. When I think about squeezing all that energy through a 4.3" woofer and a 0.75" tweeter, I laugh at the impossibility, then quickly remember that the purpose of home audio is not to create realism *per se* but to present recordings in a manner that allows users to access the main pleasures the music and recording have to offer in a format suitable for domestic consumption.

With the perfectly undomesticated Altecs, the best part was not how much energy they put into the room or how believably they could materialize a piano, but how *well* their projected energy communicated the spirit of recorded performances. In dramatic contrast, my Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5a's and Harbeth P3ESR XDs present recordings in a perfectly domesticated manner: precisely articulated, fantastic to view, and conspicuously miniaturized. They were designed to work at close range in a small space like mine.

For me, the magic of mini speakers is that they present an endlessly fascinating spectacle, one that treats every music genre equally while giving me the engineer's view of what the microphones captured and how the album tracks were mixed—exactly what the BBC's LS3/5a was created to do: show engineers what the microphones were capturing.

Unlike the Voice of the Theatre, which made everything cinema-scaled, the LS3/5a shows off its location-monitor talents by depicting vocal recitals, large orchestras,

1 See bit.ly/SteinwayMason.

and grand movie soundtracks in reduced size and loudness but in their original proportions! For me, this is key: The BBC's smallest monitor achieves its believability with proportionality and strict tone-truthfulness. And that makes for good long-term relationships.

I am recounting these observations in the hope that this notion of how speakers project energy will prepare your mind to grasp, first, Harbeth's latest version of their P3 minimonitor—the $3290/pair P3ESR XD—and, second, how the *feel* of that speaker's soundfield changed when I added Harbeth's new Nelson "bass extender + stand."

Harbeth P3ESR XD

I used, studied, and enjoyed Harbeth's P3ESR 40th Anniversary Edition from the time of my review in 2018[2] until it was replaced by the $3290/pair XD edition in 2022. Because I hadn't used the P3ESR in a couple of years, I took a few days to get a feel and see if I could notice what changed in the XD version.

I asked Harbeth's importer, Walter Swanbon of Fidelis Distribution, what the physical and design differences were between the P3ESR I reviewed and the latest XD version. "The difference is that Alan Shaw"—Harbeth's CEO and chief engineer—"reworked the crossover, ... and the result is greater resolution and transparency," Swanbon replied.

My initial impressions support that claim. The previous P3ESR was always a touch warmer than my LS3/5a, and if I remember right, better balanced but thicker than my 5a in the upper bass/lower midrange. This XD version is outstandingly clean in that region.

More than the physical difference between their tweeters and bass-mid cone materials, the most important difference between the Falcon Gold Badge LS3/5a and Harbeth's P3ESR XD is in their impedance characteristics. Both loudspeakers have nominal impedances higher than average; the Falcon is rated at 15 ohms, and the P3 is specified as "6 ohms, easy to drive." Both speakers stay above 5 ohms, allowing users to experiment with low-power tube amplifiers. In my studio, both versions cruised effortlessly with single-ended 300Bs, and both clipped easily with 2W 2A3s. Beyond that simple test, my experiments suggest Harbeth's 6 ohm P3ESR will make its best music with a wider range of solid state amplifiers than my Falcons; their very high impedance baffles some class-D amps.

Harbeth's P3ESR XDs produced their sharpest-focused detail and showcased their most solid piano realism using just a few watts from the 300Wpc (into 8 ohms) Parasound Halo A 21+ stereo amplifier, which drove the P3s with a clean, sweet-toned authority that, compared to my tube amps, put more push behind the sound. In daily use, the P3ESR XD–A 21+ pairing made recordings sound naturally reconstituted with no solid state grain, bite, or soullessness. A five-star combo.

Powered by Rogue Audio's 100W, tube-input/class-D output V3 Sphinx integrated, the P3ESRs came across as relaxed and naturally toned. The sound was rich and full, but jump and vigor were less than they had been with the A 21+. A three-point-five-star combo.

Most days during these auditions, I used my beloved Elekit 300B workhorse, the TU-8900. I never noticed any clipping or compression, and I enjoyed how its singular transparency made the P3s glow and sparkle. A four-star combo.

For more details about the P3ESR's history and construction and amplifier pairings, I'll refer you to my November 2018 review of Harbeth's 40th Anniversary Edition. Everything I wrote there still applies, including this quote: "I shall not forget the first time ... I played Harbeth's standard-edi-

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tion P3ESR in my own system. ... it took me only 30 seconds to realize that the ... P3ESR ... was delivering more useful information in the 75–300Hz octaves than either my Rogers or Falcon Acoustics LS3/5a."

The P3ESR XD alone

Lately, I've been under the spell of German pianist/composer/record producer Nils Frahm's 2011 recording *Felt*, featuring his home piano with the strings covered in felt to keep the piano quiet when he played late at night (Erased Tapes LP ERATP033LP). "Originally, I wanted to do my neighbors a favor by damping the sound of my piano. If I want to play piano during the quiet of the night, the only respectful way is by layering thick felt in front of the strings and using very gentle fingers. It was then that I discovered that my piano sounds beautiful with the damper installed."

Captivated by his discovery, Frahm placed microphones inside the piano, almost touching the lightly damped strings. This radical close miking resulted in a recording that presents listeners with a brightly lit view *inside* Frahm's instrument, a view of an exceedingly corporeal landscape of steel, wood, and felt wherein I *saw* felt-on-wood hammers hitting piano strings. Because the P3ESR XD was so exceedingly clean and clear of tone, I could leisurely watch notes decay and feel dampers coming down. What I saw was bright, sharp-focused, and totally Alice in Wonderland.

In Autochrome color

Felt's sonic thrills come from the vibrancy of its reverb tails, so to bring out as much "'verb tail" as possible, and to see how the P3 XD would handle this symphony of energy, I used Dynavector's XX2 moving coil cartridge feeding Sculpture A's €790 "Mini Nano" nanocrystalline-core step-up transformer. This copper-wired SUT was designed by Zsolt Bognár for François Saint-Gérand, founder of Sculpture A and Ana Mighty Sound. More than cores of mu-metal or amorphous cobalt, the Mini Nano's nanocrystalline core plumps and juices music signals impressed on its primary. The XX2 + Mini Nano presented recordings with supersaturated tones that made Nils Frahm's *Felt* into a trippy, inside-the-piano adventure.

The rest of this "leans toward sensual" sound system consisted of Prima Luna's EVO 100 phono stage, HoloAudio's Serene preamp, and Elekit's TU-8900 amplifier with Brimar ECC82s and Cossor 300Bs. Wires were by Triode Wire Labs.

"Dear beloved listener"

The liner notes for *Felt* are in the form of a personal letter from Frahm to record buyers, printed on an album-sized sheet of rag paper tucked inside the album sleeve. In it, Frahm explains how his next-to-the-strings miking technique brought "a host of external sounds into the recordings which most producers would try to hide: I hear myself breathing and panting, the scraping sound of the piano's action and the creaking of my wooden floorboards—all equally as loud as the music. The music becomes a contingency, a chance, an accident within all this rustling. My heart opens and I wonder what exactly it is that makes me feel so happy. *Felt* creates its own personal microcosm, offering a refuge of tender and honest beauty."

The P3ESR XDs presented Frahm's audio *verité* with a pristine clarity that exposed the high-tactility sound of wood hammers tapping steel strings veiled in felt, backed by screeching piano-hammer action and the world's longest reverb tails. In my system, this ability to peer deep into recordings was the P3ESR XD's defining trait.

2 See bit.ly/STRPP3ESR. Also see John Atkinson's review of the original P3ESR at bit.ly/JAP3ESR. At the bottom of that article, you'll find links to follow-ups by JA himself and by Brian Damkroger.

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With the First Watt SIT-3

When the Nelson Pass–designed First Watt SIT-3 power amplifier clicks with a speaker, it presents recordings in a manner that has bones, core strength, and a natural way with vocal and instrumental timbre. One of the speakers the SIT-3 really clicked with was Harbeth's P3ESR 40th Anniversary Edition; see the first link in footnote 1 for details. The SIT-3 is an 18W, transformer coupled, single-ended, single-stage class-A amplifier that uses vertically stacked, static-induction field-effect transistors exclusive to First Watt. It uses no negative feedback and dances best with 6 ohm speakers like the P3ESR XD.

With the Harbeth P3s, the SIT-3 shaped and molded soundforms into something with chunk and a beguiling plasticity. This "molding" is something most amps don't do, but I wish more amps did, because it gives dimension and body to musical forms. The SIT-3 feels like it rolls off the topmost octave, but it doesn't. Instead, it presents performers and their instruments with so much flesh and bone that I forget to notice the highs. With the P3s powered by the SIT-3, every recording venue seemed more voluminous than it did with the Parasound A 21+ or my Elekit 300Bs. With the 300Bs, the P3s show off an explicit transparency that makes it a fine speaker for choir and orchestra. The Parasound A 21+ expands the P3's soundspace, solidifies pianos, and emphasizes musical drama. The SIT-3 makes the P3s sound eerily natural and *physically real* in ways I have never experienced with other amps. This was a uniquely satisfying pairing.

The un-Corinthian Nelson

One of my sparrow spies told me that Harbeth's curiously named woofer–speaker stand combination, the Nelson, is regarded by its keepers as a visual pun—first noticed I presume after a few pints—on that famous Corinthian column topped by a statue of Admiral Horatio Nelson in Trafalgar Square. It could also reference one or more bits of less polite pub slang.

Costing $3490/pair and standing 31" from the speaker-platform on top to the tips of the cone-spiked feet on its base, the Nelson woofer uses the same Harbeth-made 4.33" (110mm)[3] radial woofer as the P3s inside a grille cloth–covered tube that feels like cardboard—though the Harbeth website says the Nelson "features the latest composite materials, providing high stiffness with low mass," so presumably it's not actually cardboard. Either way, this tube serves as what Harbeth describes as a "bandpass enclosure."

I presume this woofer is loaded somehow and is firing down into and out of the Nelson's 4" high, 14" diameter steel base. A flat panel on the back of its round-caged bottom incorporates a receptacle for the wire-wart, 24V power supply for the built-in 50W class-D amplifier. A simple control knob permits users to adjust the woofer's level. "The Nelson's digital signal processing unit optimizes the crossover frequency, phase, and shape so the Nelson takes over seamlessly as the host speaker's bass rolls off."

This all sounds like website blah blah blah, but my listening impressions suggest that something unusually correct is happening phase-wise in the octaves on either side of the Nelson's 75Hz crossover point. The Nelson features a 5k ohm input transformer that, according to Harbeth's website, "presents virtually no load to the main amplifier." I am not sure how that works, but in use it felt as though the Nelson's load might be smoothing the P3's response.

With the Nelson's levels set at 11 o'clock in my 10' × 13' × 9' room, its palm-sized drivers flattened the P3's measured frequency response below 100Hz by raising the average volume in the octaves from 25Hz to 100Hz by as much as 9dB. The Nelson is said to extend frequency response down to ~35Hz, ±3dB.

I am not an experienced subwoofer user, yet finding the best level in my room was quick and easy, and the result was a speaker that sounded larger and played smoother. Placing the Nelson + P3 in my room was also easy, as the P3ESR XD seems to play right no matter where I put it.

During my auditions, the P3/Nelson combos were 7' apart and 2' from the wall behind them.

After a week of listening, I got the point of Alan Shaw's latest invention: The Nelson adds bass weight in addition to some luxurious depth and atmosphere. That extra bass weight was obvious and welcome on Nils Frahm's *Felt*; on the first track, the bass actually shook my easy-to-shake floor. On the second, the soundspace became infinitely deep in a manner the P3 could not have done without the Nelson's help. On that same track, the loud sounds of the piano's action appeared, crackling with razor-sharp transients and microdetail. On the third track, I could hear Nils breathing. On the fourth, I could hear him whistling, and household noises coming from a room far behind him. I still had to sit close, but the voice this system projected felt full-range, elegant, and well-spoken.

Bore to stroke ratio

Compared to the P3 alone, the P3 + Nelson projected a taller energy field, wherein it seemed the woofer on the bottom made the location

3 Harbeth specifies the driver size as 110mm, equivalent to 4.33", but also refers to it as a 5" drive unit.

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of the box on top less noticeable. That in turn made the presentation feel more of a piece than with the P3ESR XDs alone. This feeling of wholeness encouraged my left brain to remind me how the Nelson moved the geometric center of the P3's spectral balance down almost a full octave, allowing my mind to work less hard extrapolating for the missing bass octaves.

This was a different experience from adding a separately located subwoofer like the KEF KC63 or SVS 3000 subs I reviewed. Adding those floor-woofers never let my mind relax completely because my audio-brain kept looking for the extra sound source. The Nelsons never revealed their locations, which caused me to speculate: Maybe I can't locate them because according to my in-room measurements the Nelson shuts off completely by 100Hz, and because, according to Harbeth's webpage, the DSP aligns phase at the crossover frequency.

Listening with Nelson, P3, and Parasound's A 21+

I imagine a lot of rock-steady Harbeth fans have discovered, as I did, that no matter how much Harbeth's P3s like 300B triodes, they light up recordings in a bolder, more articulate manner when connected to a more powerful solid state amplifier like Parasound's Halo A 21+. The tube glow is gone of course, but it is replaced by the depth and assuredness that 300W into 8 ohms can provide. For years now, the A 21+ has enhanced every speaker I've connected it to. I call it "a 10W amp with a 1000W power supply," because it plays sensitive speakers with such incredible charm.

Listening critically to the native-DSD download of Todd Garfinkle's 5.6MHz DSD recording of *Sera Una Noche Otra Noche* (M·A Recordings MA092A), and comparing it to the 176.4kHz WAV file and then to the Red Book CD, focused my attentions on transient sharpness and perceived transparency. The DSD download presented an atom-level view of this recording's raw data where nothing is sharp or dull. Through the dCS Lina DAC with Master Clock, Todd's DSD file came out with a grainless density and a brilliant transparency.

In comparison, the demonstration-quality 24/176.4 WAV file displayed a different light-and-contrast structure. PCM's transparency was drier and more coolly lit. Transients in the WAV file seemed edge-sharpened compared to DSD and CD. The CD came through with the greatest body, slam, and texture, but this high punch factor was accompanied by a slightly thicker air, a slightly softer focus, and reduced transparency. With the Nelson woofer, Harbeth's P3ESR XD exposed these elusive differences more clearly than it did without the woofer. Adding Harbeth's bass column relaxed and clarified the P3 monitors in a manner that made all recordings easier to enjoy and scrutinize.

The Nelson with the Gold Badge

Standing 29" high, the Nelson places my Falcon Gold Badges 5" higher than they sit on my 24" Sound Anchor Stands. Because that's where they worked best with the P3s, I have the Nelsons and the Gold Badges sitting 22" from the speaker backs to the wall behind them; that's 11" farther out than I would usually have the Falcons. This is a not-insignificant repositioning of my reference speaker, so I listened for a couple days with the Nelsons powered off; the result was a lighter, bouncier, more transparent speaker. Resting on taller stands, the Falcons presented a leaner, cleaner 50Hz to 500Hz, which I reasoned might help them mesh with the Nelsons. And I believe it did.

I often say that I need the 75Hz to 300Hz octaves to be clean and well-sorted, because my LS3/5a's are famously wayward in that region. Adding a subwoofer won't make those two octaves clearer, but it can smooth out their frequency response. Which is precisely what the Nelson and its clever DSP did. The effect of this flattening was to smooth and sweeten the Falcon's voice and add body to its tone.

Nowhere was this extra body and sweeter voice more obvious than it was playing a Japanese flute and traditional dance album from 1968 (King Records LP SKM 29). This ultrahigh-fidelity recording of drums, shakuhachi flute, stringed koto, or biwa, occupied my room in a manner I can only describe as stunningly physical and true-to-life. That awe-inducing realism was dramatically reduced when I turned the Nelson woofer off.

In sum

Harbeth's P2ESR XD sounded exactly as I expected it would: more finely detailed and transparent than my memories of the 40th Anniversary edition I used for several years.

The big news of this 86th Dream, though, is the Nelson woofer's ability to add an octave of bass and blend invisibly with Harbeth's P3ESR XD, *and* my Falcon LS3/5a. I did not predict that. The Nelson enabled both speakers to image from floor to ceiling and deliver a mesmerizing, precisely rendered spectacle that even LS3/5a purists like me could embrace.

Adding the Nelson subwoofer stand to Harbeth's P3ESR XD created an entirely new, longer-wheelbase, smoother-riding, fuller-sounding speaker, a must-audition for Harbeth P3 and LS3/5a aficionados. ■

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BY ALEX HALBERSTADT

THIS ISSUE: A dozen red-hot, stone-cold Country & Western albums that after you hear them, you won't want to live without.

The Gal Who Invented Kissin'

Country is a music of diverse pleasures: the *bel canto* balladry of George Jones and Tammy Wynette, the psychologically acute portraiture of Tom T. Hall, the politically rousing storytelling of Loretta Lynn, the self-deprecating mythmaking of Billy Joe Shaver, the bone-chilling spirituality of Ralph Stanley. It's also full of contradictions: Maligned by some as hackneyed and simplistic, its lyrics can attain a sophistication rarely encountered in other music. Dismissed for reactionary politics, it has consistently offered up fierce critiques of inequality, bigotry, and injustice (see Johnny Cash's *Bitter Tears*, below). And if during certain periods the country charts seem swamped with work of almost unimaginable ickiness and bathos, there are usually flashes of musical sublimity glimmering through.

For years, a certain kind of listener has turned up their nose at country's directness, regionalism, and twang, as though ears that delight in Dame Janet Baker singing Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* cannot possibly enjoy the Louvin Brothers' equally wrenching rendition of "When I Stop Dreaming." This, of course, betrays nothing but a lack of imagination.

This magazine hasn't been exempt from this strain of snobbery. Reader mail about a previous column on Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard suggested that it had reached an underserved segment of our readership, and what follows is a list of a dozen favorite country records that number among the most delightful, moving, and ass-shaking in all of American (and Canadian) music.

This little list isn't intended to be a "greatest" anything, only a collection of personal favorites—ranking musical art makes about as much sense as ranking lovers. Also, I haven't made a good-faith effort to represent the last decade. Though it's an unpopular opinion to air publicly, not every age is equal in yielding cultural treasures, or as my friend Dave, a classics professor turned cocktail writer, says, "almost 200 years passed between Chaucer and Shakespeare." Finally, many of these records happen to sound fantastic, suitable for your most exotic cartridge, thickest cables, and largest cognac snifter.

DOLLY PARTON, EMMYLOU HARRIS, LINDA RONSTADT, *TRIO*, WARNER BROS., 1987

One of the oddest and loveliest things that happens in country music is the way voices sometimes blend to create something new, which exists apart from the individual singers. "The sound that we made together surprised and astonished the three of us," Harris reported after singing with Parton and Ronstadt for the first time at her home in Los Angeles in 1975. The record they completed 12 years later astonished everyone else, too, from diehard country fans to suburban MOR[1] listeners to indie-rock kids discovering old-timey music. A mix of traditional standards like "Rosewood Casket" and "Farther Along," songs by contemporaries like Kate McGarrigle and Linda Thompson, Parton originals like "The Pain of Loving You," and Jimmie Rodgers's 1932 chestnut "Hobo's Meditation," the material is bound together by the unearthly sound of the three singers: Ronstadt's outsize soprano, Harris's delicate, amber-colored instrument, and Parton's inimitable vibrato, reminiscent of a leaf trembling in the breeze. George Massenburg's elegant production and a band featuring Ry Cooder completed one of the most ravishing records in country music. If you can listen to Parton singing "Wildflowers" without getting choked up, you may be beyond the reach of music.

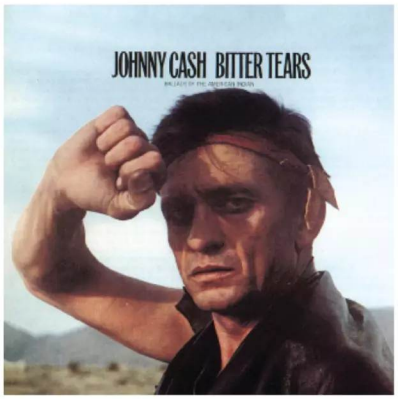
THE LOUVIN BROTHERS, *TRAGIC SONGS OF LIFE*, CAPITOL, 1956

The summits of close harmony—also known by the creepier name "blood harmony"—have often been scaled by siblings: Who knows the crannies of your voice better than someone you've been singing with since toddlerhood? And among country's great blood-harmony singing groups, none can match the Louvins at their prime. Charlie's reassuring baritone and Ira's piercing, sky-high tenor worked together like circus aerialists, one catching the other at just the right moment. Like many great singers, Ira was torn between the pull of the church and the more tangible blandishments of Satan, and his life often resembled a soap opera of blackout drinking binges and firearm-grade marital disputes that derailed the group too soon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, happy songs didn't come naturally to the brothers from Henagar, Alabama. Their first long-player, their finest, is a collection of 12 shiver-inducing tales that seem to emerge from the timeless antiquity of ghost stories. You may have heard Kurt Cobain's aptly unsettling cover of "In the Pines"—a song that hints at some unspeakable desolation without quite naming it. Ira's keening howl on the original is incomparably scarier.

Happy songs didn't come naturally to the brothers from Henagar, Alabama.

1 Middle of the Road.

JOHNNY CASH, *BITTER TEARS: BALLADS OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN*, COLUMBIA, 1964

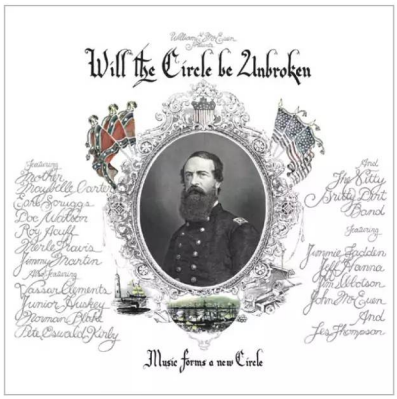


"General George A. Custer/Oh, his yellow hair had luster/But the general don't ride well anymore," sang Johnny Cash on one of the strangest and most moving entries in his discography. An early example of what would come to be known as a concept album, *Bitter Tears* is a collection of protest songs about the mistreatment and betrayal of Native Americans by the country's white settlers, including five by folk singer Peter LaFarge. Cash recorded it after years of immersing himself in the tragic stories of the Pima and the Cherokee, and it pulls no punches. "By the time I actually recorded the album," Cash recalled, "I carried a heavy load of sadness and outrage." On tracks like "Apache Tears" and "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," he lays out episodes from this unsavory history, and on the rousing "Custer," he gleefully jeers and mocks the loser of the Battle of Little Bighorn. Spooked, Columbia didn't promote the album and most radio stations refused to play it. Cash wasn't about to back down: he took out an ad in *Billboard* that read, in part, "DJs, station managers, owners, etc., where are your guts?" and traveled around the country handing out the record until it nearly topped the charts. Recognized as a landmark today, *Bitter Tears* has spawned a tribute album and documentary, both of which are worth your time.

MADDOX BROTHERS AND ROSE, *AMERICA'S MOST COLORFUL HILLBILLY BAND: THEIR ORIGINAL RECORDINGS 1946-1951, VOLUMES 1 AND 2*, ARHOOLIE, 1993-95

I don't know exactly how much credit Rose Maddox and her brothers deserve for inventing rock'n'roll, but I'm certain it's more than they've gotten. Natives of Boaz, Alabama, who rode the freights to work in the migrant camps of California's San Joaquin Valley, they became the hottest country act on the West Coast. With their slap-bass boogies, propane-torch electric guitar lines, and Rose's hollering, blow-down-the-doors vocals, they absolutely tore up Bakersfield's blood-bucket honkytonks. These two discs capture their rawest, wildest sides, cut for the 4-Star label in the years immediately following World War II. As these songs make clear, Rose sure wasn't angling to be a cowboy's sweetheart: Just listen to her belting "I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again" and shouting "Hooray for alimony!" over her clan's hooting and cackling. All this wildness doesn't foreclose consistency—among the nearly 60 tracks there's not a single dud.

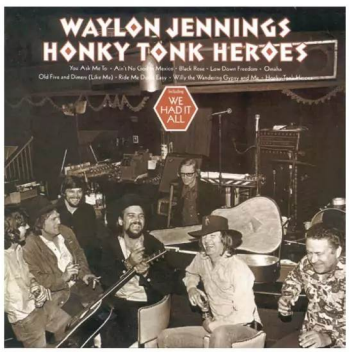
THE NITTY GRITTY DIRT BAND, *WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN*, 1972

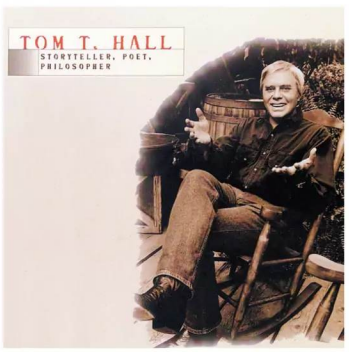


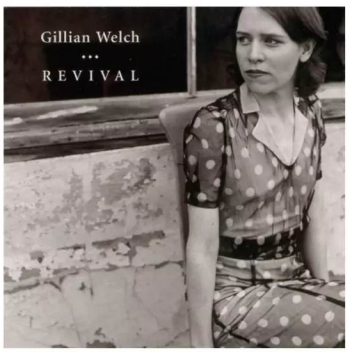
Longhairs from Long Beach, California, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band started off in the late 1960s as something like a jug band novelty act, scoring a solitary hit with a cover of "Mr. Bojangles" and owning the dubious honor of being the first to record the songs of Kenny Loggins. But in 1971, in a new guise as a straight-ahead country and bluegrass group, they traveled to Nashville to record with a stellar lineup of older musicians whose commercial significance had waned but who remained in fine form, including Merle Travis, Doc Watson, Roy Acuff, Mother Maybelle Carter, Earl Scruggs, Jimmy Martin, and Vassar Clements. The resulting three-LP set captured the extended jam session built around stunning renditions of older music: there's Travis's haunting singing and playing on "Dark as a Dungeon" and Mother Maybelle lending her autoharp and beautifully faded voice to the Carter Family's "Wildwood Flower," a number that many aspiring country guitarists learn to play first. The sessions were mixed direct to 30ips two-track tape, which lends the resulting three-LP set both the live feeling of a concert and stunning sound. A time machine that brings together three generations of musicians, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* has introduced listeners to country, bluegrass, and folk music for the past half-century and has lost none of its vivid, joyful punch.

HANK SNOW THE SINGING RANGER AND HIS RAINBOW RANCH BOYS, *COUNTRY CLASSICS*, RCA, 1956

Many remember Hank Snow as a diminutive, toupéed elder squeezed into a succession of Nudie suits, lampooned by actor Henry Gibson in Robert Altman's *Nashville*. They need to dig deeper, back to 1950. That's when the 36-year-old Snow—having run away at 12 from an abusive stepfather in Brooklyn, Nova Scotia, to become a merchant marine—arrived at the Grand Ole Opry. RCA had already released "The Golden Rocket" on both 78rpm shellac and 45rpm vinyl. With their slashing tempos, Latin syncopation, and proto-rockabilly feel, the remarkable series of hits that followed foreshadowed the coming of rock'n'roll. Lyrically, the records are as inventive and genuinely mad as any in country music—who can forget Madam Lozonga teaching La Conga from "The Rhumba Boogie," or the "The Gal Who Invented Kissin'": "On every kind of hug and kiss," Snow informs us, "she holds the copyright." Not to be missed in this garden







of musical delights is Snow's ebullient, tasteful, and downright juicy guitar playing. This LP collects the best of the early singles; they can also be found on BMG's excellent 1997 CD, *The Essential Hank Snow*.

WAYLON JENNINGS, *HONKY TONK HEROES*, 1973

A Falstaffian figure in country music, Waylon Jennings at his best sounded the way every shower singer dreams of sounding: commanding, joyous, and up to no good. Possibly the most appealing thing about him is that he was nearly always slightly full of shit but let you know that he knew it. In Billy Joe Shaver—as brilliant a songwriter as they come and something akin to a modern-day cowboy—Jennings found the perfect auteur for the outlaw persona he was trying to craft after shaking off the middle-of-the-road trappings of his '60s material. On *Honky Tonk Heroes*, Shaver wrote every song save one. Never mind that he released most of them on his own excellent debut record that same year—the songs seemed to have been written with Jennings in mind. On "Black Rose" and "Willie the Wandering Gypsy and Me," Jennings sounds spiritually liberated or at least psychically unburdened. He inhabits the lyrics like custom-made boots, rocking with abandon. With Reggie Young on guitar, Ralph Mooney on steel, and the Waylors in top form—and mastered with the finest of RCA's Dynaflex magic—*Honky Tonk Heroes* cut like a chainsaw through the wedding cake of the Nashville sound, with its choirs, strings, and cooing sopranos. Perfect from the first note to the last.

TOM T. HALL, *STORYTELLER, POET, PHILOSOPHER*, MERCURY, 1995

Tom T. Hall had a face for insurance. Even as a young man, he looked middle-aged. He lacked John Prine's weird sense of humor, Johnny Cash's drop-dead baritone, and Gram Parsons's thirst-trap looks. But no one wrote a better story song. Many are about the troubled, the poor, and the forgotten, but what Hall could do with unsettling regularity is capture fleeting emotions and situations that rarely showed up outside of serious books. There's the farmer watching his neighbor's funeral procession from inside his truck in "Ballad of Forty Dollars," and the family man thinking guiltily about his lover while spending a weekend morning at home in "Margie's at the Lincoln Park Inn." In his writing, Hall avoids sentimentality and self-pity, but his homely, molasses-hued voice can reduce you to tears in a few lines. In "Mama Bake a Pie (Daddy Kill a Chicken)," he fits the story of a maimed Vietnam vet returning home into less than three minutes, and to this day I cannot get through it without a quantity of Kleenex nearby. All but one of Hall's wonderful early LPs appear to be out of print, so the easiest way to hear him is on this fittingly unsexy two-CD compilation, which nonetheless collects nearly all the wonderful early songs.

GILLIAN WELCH, *REVIVAL*, ALMO SOUNDS, 1996

On her debut recording, Gillian Welch accomplished something most country artists never do: She introduced two honest-to-goodness standards, in "Orphan Girl" (later recorded by Emmylou Harris and others) and the bluegrass-tinged "Acony Bell." Then there's her cool-toned, tough, supremely expressive singing and the angular, downright thrilling guitar playing of her bandmate and songwriting partner David Rawlings. Welch sounds deliberately, willfully traditional, and some critics carped that her debut was a self-conscious pastiche of old-timey music. I suppose they are entitled to their opinions, and they can have all the Miranda Lambert records they want. Produced with real empathy by T-Bone Burnett, *Revival* foregrounds Welch's intelligence, taste, and restraint. To listen to her storytelling and high-lonesome singing on "Annabelle" is to realize she belongs in the company of every classic singer who's come before. Strictly speaking, it's not Welch's best album—both *Time (The Revelator)* and *The Harrow & The Harvest* are even more singular and accomplished—but it chronicles the excitement of a fully formed artist announcing herself to the world.

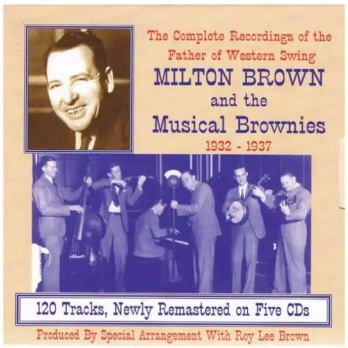
THE STANLEY BROTHERS, *COUNTRY PICKIN' AND SINGIN'*, MERCURY, 1958

Some music just gets you where you live. Carter and Ralph Stanley's voices bring me into a state of quietude; my mind empties out and goosebumps begin to roil my flesh. There's a plaintive, raw cry in their singing that treads the line between devotion and terror, as wondrous and wild as a forest at night, and an Appalachian weirdness that cannot be reasoned away. And there's no better recording on which to experience it than their first long-player, a collection of whip-fast bluegrass breakdowns like "Clinch Mountain Blues" and "Orange Blossom Special," featuring Ralph's impeccable banjo solos, as well as slower religious numbers like "A Voice From On High," on which you can hear Ralph's high, timorous quaver come out from behind Carter's baritone. But there is no song anywhere like the Stanleys' take on the 19th century hymn "Angel Band," sung with such palpable awe that it makes the breath catch in my throat. If there's a song on this list that you *must* hear today, this is the one. For those not looking to prowl for old vinyl, these tracks are also available on *The Complete Mercury Recordings*, a lovely two-CD set that covers the brothers' indispensable mid-1950s period.

RAY CHARLES, *MODERN SOUNDS IN COUNTRY AND WESTERN MUSIC VOLS. 1-2*, ABC-PARAMOUNT, 1962

Freshly signed to ABC records, Ray Charles was at the height of his stardom in 1962 and could have recorded any music he wanted. What he chose to release were two LPs of country songs, old and new (five by Hank Williams), backed with a hard-swinging big band as well as a string section and choir. If you're thinking that this might sound warmed-over and cheesy, you haven't heard the records. Charles, possibly the most charismatic vocalist who's ever lived, treated this material like he would any other soul record; in interviews he claimed not to see much difference between a country tune and a blues. And he put these songs across with imagination, attention, and total confidence, bringing out elements not always prominent in the originals, so that the results are not just fluent but

definitive. Just listen to the Cinemascope sorrow he wrings out of "You Win Again," or his performance of Ted Daffan's 1942 cowboy ballad "Born to Lose," so masterful that it has become permanently associated with Charles. Besides containing material as compelling as Charles ever recorded, these records' massive artistic and commercial success proved that the distinctions, both aesthetic and racial, that Americans imposed on their music were nothing but a lie. It is impossible to overstate the impact and importance of these records, or their undeniable grandeur.



MILTON BROWN AND THE MUSICAL BROWNIES, *THE COMPLETE RECORDINGS OF THE FATHER OF WESTERN SWING, 1932-1937*, TEXAS ROSE RECORDS, 1995
No music makes me giddier than Western Swing. Imagine a midcentury jazz band outfitted with fiddles and amplified guitars traveling by bus to play dances across the Southwest for urbanites from Dallas and Tulsa, Mexican-American migrant workers from El Paso, and field hands from the Panhandle, sometimes in the same week. The bands learned every kind of number that someone was apt to want to dance to, from "San Antonio Rose" to "La Golondrina" to "Darktown Strutter's Ball," and to this day remain the most culturally omnivorous ensembles ever heard in this country. Bob Wills became as synonymous with Western Swing as Bill Monroe is with bluegrass, but its architect and greatest practitioner was Milton Brown, whose brief career is one of the glories of American music. In their heyday, the Fort Worth–based Brownies were one of the hottest bands in existence, grounded by Brown's warm, insouciant singing, while the stylistic and emotional range of the material remains unparalleled. These recordings are every bit as important as those by Django Reinhardt or Duke Ellington; it's bewildering that they aren't better known. This definitive set collects all 120 sides the band recorded for Victor and Decca in sound that is respectable though hardly high-fidelity. For me, songs like "Chinatown, My Chinatown," "Avalon," and "Hesitation Blues" come down to what I think of as *delight*—not in the dictionary sense of "great pleasure," but pleasure experienced in the presence of something obviously true and right, a recognition of the human capacity for perfection. ■

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SPIN DOCTOR

BY MICHAEL TREI

THIS ISSUE: Lyra Atlas λ Lambda MC cartridge; cool stuff from AXPONA; fixing footfall problems.

Spring fever

It has been more than a decade since 2012, when Lyra launched the original Atlas moving coil cartridge as the company's flagship, but in the intervening years, there have been a few updates. First, in 2016, Lyra introduced what they call the SL versions of the Atlas and also the Etna. These cartridges were designed to take advantage of a new crop of transimpedance phono preamps like the CH Precision P1 and the Sutherland Phono Loco, which boast exceptionally low noise levels but work best with cartridges that have very low impedance. Cutting the number of turns on each of the cartridge's two coils in half reduces the moving mass and inertia, allowing the stylus/cantilever assembly to respond more accurately to the tiny groove modulations. This results in improved tracking at the cost of a lower output level, which, thankfully, transimpedance phono preamps are well-equipped to handle.

Then in 2020, both Atlas and Etna versions were updated to new λ Lambda versions, with a redesigned suspension and damper system that Lyra says delivers enhancements in clarity and resolution. Visually, you can easily distinguish between the older and λ Lambda versions by color: Some parts of the structure went from bright emerald green to lurid purple.

When Shane Buettner of MIBS Distribution, Lyra's new US importer, noticed I was using an original Atlas cartridge as one of my references, he offered to upgrade it to the latest version so that I could hear the differences. To avoid introducing too many variables, we agreed to stick with the standard, higher output version (not the SL), which has the added advantage of being a better match for a wider range of phono preamps. While the standard Atlas λ Lambda ($13,195) does have more than twice the signal level of the Atlas SL, it is, at 0.56mV, very much a low-output cartridge, requiring a phono preamp with plenty of gain.

When I substituted the Atlas λ Lambda for the older version in my Brinkmann La Grange turntable with Brinkmann 12.1 tonearm, the improvement in resolution and lucidity was instantly obvious. Some of this could be due to wear on the older cartridge, but I'm sure I never had this level of clarity even when it was fresher. The original Atlas was famous for its world-beating dynamics and bass slam, but it could get a bit relentless at times with its "just the facts" presentation. The λ Lambda mixes in a little more beauty, not by softening the sound or adding an artificial sense of glow but by adding resolution, extracting and delivering more of the intrinsic beauty in the recording.

Comparing the sound of the Atlas λ Lambda into the voltage-drive input and current-drive input of the CH Precision P1 proved interesting. Both options sounded superb. The current-drive side gave the Atlas a more buttoned-down and tidy presentation, while the voltage-drive input was the freer and wilder sister, with a more open and expansive sound. On the voltage side, Lyra's loading recommendations often make me giggle; the Atlas's guideline—somewhere between 104 and 887 ohms—is a perfect example. Those figures were calculated based on the total load inductance and capacitance—but wouldn't it have been simpler to just say 100–1k ohms? I guess it's just Lyra designer Jonathan Carr's way of giving us a little smile. After some listening, I settled on 475 ohms, same as the older Atlas.

On the Geri Allen, Charlie Haden, and Paul Motian trio album *Segments* (DIW 7034), drummer Motian's deft touch with

his brushes on the standard "You'll Never Know" displays the Atlas's improvements as clearly as anything I found. The contrast in tonal signature between each drum and cymbal was vividly on display, with a little less smearing at the top end. The high-frequency detail took on a security that reminded me of a master tape, making the listening experience a little more relaxed.

To check that the Atlas's famous slam and bass power remained intact, I played "Airhead" from Thomas Dolby's *Aliens Ate My Buick* (EMI Manhattan Records E1-48075) and was relieved to find that the pants leg–flapping bass was as powerful as ever, with some newfound additional clarity. The Atlas λ Lambda changes are all on the upside.

Few cartridges are as expensive as the Lyra Atlas λ, but fewer still can match its performance. It still has the same tell-it-like-it-is sound as the original Atlas, but now with even further enhancements in resolution and clarity. When current Atlas owners send their cartridges to Lyra for a rebuild, the λ Lambda enhancements will be added for no additional charge.

Tiptoe through the 'tables—or, how to stop your record from skipping

One of the most common turntable-related problems I get asked to solve is footfalls. People with squishy floors must tiptoe gingerly back to the listening seat lest they send the stylus skipping across the record—no fun! Good music should make you want to get up and dance; that's not exactly in the cards if doing so sends the needle flying.

This topic reminds me of a school ski trip I took to Austria in the mid-1970s. I was a teenager, and the jukebox in the dorm we stayed in turned out to be unskippable. That machine, from AMI Rowe, was low and wide and sat on casters. We challenged each other to make it skip by rolling it out into the room and then quickly ramming it back against the wall, all while some Euro-disco hit like "Yes Sir, I Can Boogie" by Baccara or "Daddy Cool" by Boney M was playing. The machine shrugged off all this teenage abuse and continued playing unscathed as we watched through its glass top

to see the record-player mechanism swinging back and forth on the giant springs that isolated it from the outside world.

Giant springs and a 35gm tracking force is not a very audiophile-friendly footfall solution. For a modern-day fix, we first need to consider why turntables skip.

In recent years, I've begun to understand how different building construction methods affect turntable users. Here in North America, we seem to suffer from more footfall problems than audiophiles in other countries. It comes down to how we build our houses and who designs our turntables. A handful of fine companies make turntables in the US, but, though it pains me to say it, most new turntables I encounter come from Europe or Asia. In Asia and Europe, most homes—those likely to host turntables anyway—are made from bricks or concrete or are just more sturdily built. European turntable designers develop their products in an environment where the floors don't move as much; they don't encounter footfall issues like the ones we have here. They don't generally think of footfalls as a problem that needs to be solved.

The problem affects two opposite types of turntable designs. First are solid turntables with little or no isolation from the underlying supporting surface—three or four rubber feet at best. Then there are 'tables that are softly sprung, with suspensions made to absorb small-amplitude, vertical vibrations in a certain range of frequencies, which go haywire when they encounter vibrations too large, too low (in frequency), or too lateral.

With the first group, any jolt to a spongy floor caused by walking or dancing will travel straight up the rack into the turntable, often with enough force to knock the needle out of the groove. I encountered this recently with a guy whose record would skip every time an elevated New York subway train went past a few hundred feet from his window.

With nonsuspended turntables, the problem can usually be solved rather simply, by introducing a compliant layer between the turntable and the cabinet or stand supporting it. Feel free to get fancy and tweaky, with expensive audiophile footers and platforms, but a simple Sorbothane disc under each footer will be sufficient to prove the concept. The material you use must be appropriately thick and compliant relative to the turntable weight, so experiment. With nonsuspended 'tables, it's usually sufficient to keep those big jolts at bay, allowing skip-free playback.

I tend to associate softly sprung turntables with the British, due to the popularity of such suspended 'tables as the Linn Sondek LP12, Systemdek (both Scottish), and Michell Gyrodec (English), but bouncy turntable suspensions go back farther, to American 'tables like the AR-XA and the H.H. Scott 710-A. The suspensions on such 'tables are intended to reduce or eliminate vibrations—as long as the frequency isn't too low, the amplitude isn't too large—and the motion is strictly vertical. Footfalls tend to cause problems for such 'tables mostly on loose, bouncy wood floors, where the frequency is very low and the floor's displacement can be large.

Linns are notoriously difficult to use on bouncy wood floors, and in difficult cases the typical recommendation is to install a wall-mounted shelf. That's a great solution, and plenty of suitable wall shelves exist, like the Pangea Premier SE MkII and the Target Audio WV. Both have wall-fixing bolts spaced 16 inches apart, so you can screw them into the studs on a standard stud wall.

If a wall shelf isn't an option in your space, there are ways to make a turntable on a bouncy floor more stable, but first we need to consider how a suspended wood floor moves. Underneath the finished floor is a layer called the subfloor, which is plywood or a manufactured wood product and is in turn is supported by a row of spaced wood planks, called joists. Joists, in turn, are supported by a wood sill that runs around the perimeter of the room, where the floor meets the wall. Typically, a wood floor is most solid at the sill. Usually—but not always—it is also solid over joists. The farther you go from a joist—and especially from the sill—the more the structure flexes. The worst problems occur when the builder messes up, as when two pieces form a seam that's not over a joist, so the subfloor is unsupported at the edges. Spots like that can be especially squishy.

Sometimes people tell me they don't anticipate a problem because the turntable will be placed on a heavy piece of furniture. The assumption is that this will force the floor down against the subfloor and joists, causing the floor to flex less. For whatever reason, in practice, I usually find that this only exacerbates the problem.

So, what to do? The first piece of advice is obvious. Try to find a less-spongy spot to place your turntable rack. If that works, you're done.

If you have access to the floor from below—as when your listening space is above an unfinished basement—you have some other options. The easiest is to hammer shims between the joists and the subfloor. If the sponginess is due to the subfloor being poorly connected with the joists, this could solve your problem.

A more dramatic fix is to use a jack to prop up the floor joists (or the subflooring directly, whichever is the problem) from below. This solution can be extremely effective if you can do it. You can even rent a jack and use it to install a new post directly under the spongy area.

But what if you don't have access from below? Most likely, you have placed your turntable stand with its rear legs near the wall, where the floor is supported by the sill. The front legs will extend a couple of feet out into the room, where the floor may be springier. As we walk around the room, the bouncing floor causes the front legs of the rack to move up and down, while the rear legs remain still. This causes the top shelf of the stand to move not just vertically but also laterally. Even with its suspension tuned to perfection, a Linn LP12 doesn't deal well with horizontal movement.

The solution is to brace the top of the turntable stand against the wall behind it using some kind of stiff wedge. This will inhibit the rack from moving laterally. I have made temporary fixes using everything from a stack of CD cases to a couple of hardcover books, jammed between the top rear of the stand and the wall, in a way that puts pressure on the rack. If this works, you can make a fancier rig using parts procured from the hardware store. Perhaps some audio accessory manufacturer will read this and come up with an audiophile-approved version you can buy for big bucks. If that's you, please remember where you got the idea.

The Spin Doctor visits AXPONA

These days, there's a hi-fi show taking place somewhere on the planet pretty much every weekend, but for me, spring is show season. First, in April, comes AXPONA, which is held near Chicago. AXPONA is the largest North American high-end audio show, making it pretty much impossible for one person to see everything during the three-day event. Even with my focus on record-playing gear, I found myself skipping some rooms, telling myself that I could catch them a month later at High End Munich. Munich is even bigger than AXPONA, so we'll have to see how that plays out.

With that in mind, here are a few things that caught my eye at AXPONA 2024.

John DeVore of DeVore Fidelity shook things up by demonstrating his new Orangutan Bronze speakers by playing 78rpm records on an EMT 928 II turntable with

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Pictured: Lina DAC (top), optional Master Clock (bottom)

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EMT 909 tonearm ($14,995) and an EMT TND 065 cartridge. That's gutsy.

Aidas from Lithuania was playing a limited edition of their top cartridge, the Mammoth Gold LE. Aidas says that they were able to locate a limited supply of extra-pure mammoth tusk material, which allowed them to create a run of 10 cartridge bodies which could hold larger Alnico5 magnets.

To amplify the Aidas Mammoth cartridge, Nick Doshi of Doshi Audio was showing a prototype of a fully customizable phono preamp. Details were thin on the ground, but it looked and sounded stunning playing through the latest version of Joseph Audio's Pearl speakers.

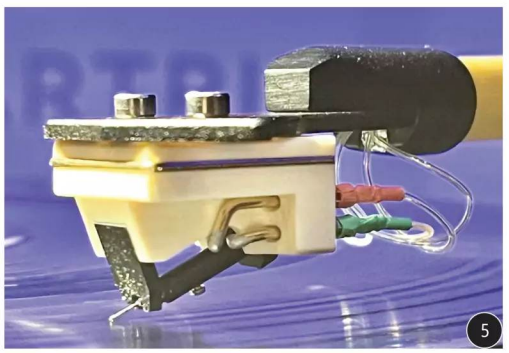
Pro-Ject has really stepped up its tonearm game of late, possibly due to the demise of Jelco, which previously dominated this market. They showed updated versions of most of their arms, including the Premium EVO9 AS ($1999).

Tucked away in the Yamaha room, I found a very cool display of vintage Yamaha milestone products, including a 1954 turntable called, simply, the Hi-Fi Player F11. Yamaha claims that this was the very first audio component to use the term "hi-fi" in its name.

I stopped in at the Belleson room primarily to check that the review sample Acoustic Signature turntable I had shipped just before the show had made it safely. While there, I took a listen. I was impressed by their Brilliance phono preamp ($8500), which can be controlled by an app running on your phone or tablet.

1. The Pro-Ject Premium EVO9 AS **2.** Nick Doshi's Customizable Phono Pre **3.** Vintage Yamaha **4.** The Thiele turntable and tonearm **5.** The Aidas Mammoth Gold LE **6.** The Pro-Ject Premium EVO9 AS **7.** The Belleson Brilliance phono preamp.

For many years, Helmut Thiele was the head of turntable and tonearm design for Thorens. His creations include the Thorens Reference turntable that made such a splash at last year's High End Munich show. Recently, he developed a new turntable and tonearm bearing (pun intended) his own name, the Thiele TT01 turntable and TA01 tonearm ($28,000). The arm uses a moving pivot design to remain tangential to the groove, in a way that reminds me of Frank Schröder's LT arm.



The Acoustic Signature Load S record weight, or, why you should always check the box carefully

In Spin Doctor 13, I said that the Acoustic Signature Verona NEO turntable doesn't come with a record weight—or anyway that my review sample didn't. I pressed the excellent Ultra Carbon TC-40 weight from Poland into service in its place. Well, when I went to pack up the Verona to return it, I found a record weight in the box. In my haste and excitement to get the Verona set up and playing, I somehow managed to miss it. Imagine my red face at the AXPONA show when I tried to explain to Acoustic Signature sales manager Robert Hagemann why his beautiful Load S record weight didn't make it into the review. He passed the weight back to me. I promised a follow-up.

At 715gm (1.6lb), the Load S has about 3/4 of the heft of the TC-40, which is pretty surprising considering it's made from aluminum alloy rather than the TC-40's steel. The Load S uses five of Acoustic Signature's highly effective silencer dampers to control resonance. Last year, Acoustic Signature head honcho Gunther Frohnhöfer demonstrated their effectiveness to me using two identical platters, one with the dampers removed—that platter rang like a bell when you tapped it—and another with the dampers installed; when tapped, that one felt like it was made from concrete.

While the Load S relies mostly on gravity to apply pressure to the record surface, it also has a collet-type spindle hole that you can tighten by twisting the upper half. In use, I found that tightening the weight made it difficult to remove from the platter, even after releasing the collet, but I expect this will loosen up with repeated use. Sonically, the results were quite similar to the TC-40: Under the right conditions, there is a small but repeatable improvement in resolution and low-level detail with the record weight in place. It arrives beautifully presented in a high gloss painted case, as it should given its not insignificant cost: $749 to $899, depending on the finish. ■

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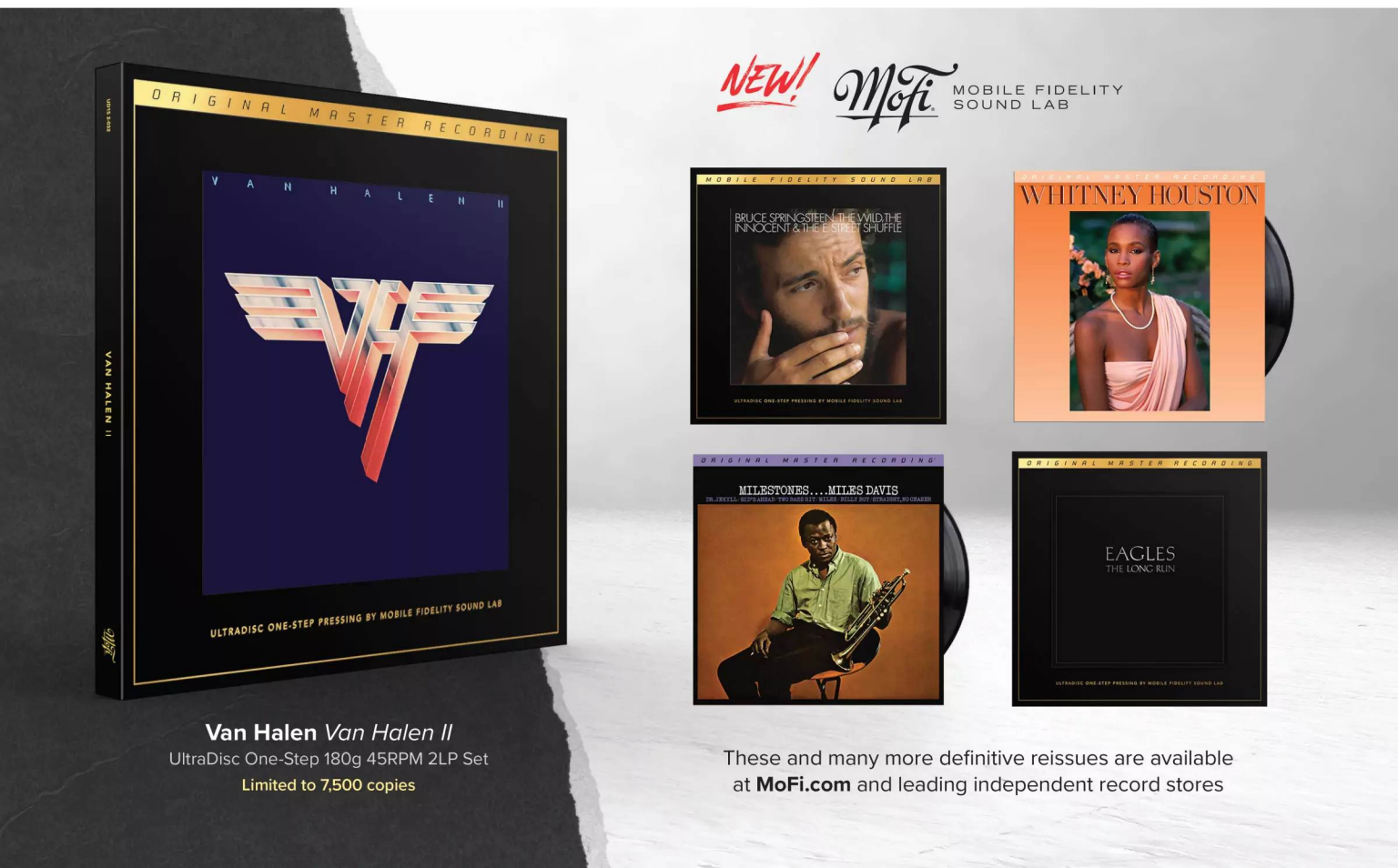

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The special sound of tubes, which flows like water and sometimes shines like the golden sun you hopefully shielded your eyes from during the recent eclipse, makes it all worth it—*if* the design and implementation are good and you can't get similar sound from low-maintenance solid state.[1]

I haven't reviewed much tube gear, but when I have—Bruce Moore and VTL (in my pre-*Stereophile* days), Audio Research, and in our September 2022 issue,[2] the towering Octave Jubilee Mono

1 The gap between the best tube and solid-state gear has diminished as technology has improved and engineers have spent as much time focusing on music as on schematics and measurements.

2 The only components in my system that remain from the Octave Jubilee Mono SE review are the Nordost cabling, NAS drive, Grand Prix Monza rack/amp stands, and some peripherals.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Tubed pentode push-pull mono power amplifier. Tube complement: four KT88 S4A Carbon standard, four KT120 or KT150 optional; two ECC82; one 6SN7. Inputs: 1 balanced (XLR), 1 single-ended (RCA). Outputs: 1 pair binding posts. Output power: 200W average/220W peak power into 4 ohms (20/20.4dBW). Minimum load impedance: 2 ohms. Voltage gain: 26dB. Input sensitivity: 1.5V for full output power. Frequency response: 20Hz–70kHz, –3dB at full power, 5Hz–80kHz, –3dB at 5W. S/N ratio: 116dB (100µV, 150 Hz–15kHz). Power consumption: <20W Eco Mode, 180W idle, 550W at full power. **Dimensions** Amplifier: 19.2" (488mm) W × 16.2" (412mm) D × 9.0" (229mm) H. Weight: 65.7lb (29.8kg). Optional Super Black Box: 7.9" (200mm) × 5.9" (150mm) × 13.8" (350mm). Weight: 12.35lb (5.6kg). **Finish** Silver or Black. **Serial numbers of units reviewed** MRE 220 SE: 92318714 & 92318715 (auditioned), 92318233 (measured). Designed and built in Germany. **Price** Base: $28,500/pair w/ KT88 S4A Carbon; price as reviewed, $37,100/pair. Options: KT120 adds $800/set; KT150 adds $1600/set; Super Black Box adds $7000/pair; Filter 3-P adds $3000. Approximate number of US dealers: 10 (plus three in Canada). Warranty: 5 years parts and labor with registration, 1 year on tubes. **Manufacturer** Octave Audio, Reutäckerstrasse 5, 76307 Karlsbad, Germany. Web: octave.de/en. US distributor: Dynaudio USA, 500 Lindberg Ln., Northbrook, IL 60062. Tel: (847) 730-3280.

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SE tubed pentode push-pull monoblocks[3]—I've been enamored of their sound. I waxed ecstatic about the "captivating beauty" and "heavenly" highs of the Jubilee Mono SEs. I can still recall how gorgeous they sounded; every listen was special.

Hence, my enthusiastic "yes" to a solicitation from John Quick, VP of Sales & Marketing for Dynaudio North America, Octave's North American distributor, to review the smaller MRE 220 SE[4] mono push-pull tube amplifiers ($28,500/pair base price, $37,100/pair in the ultimate configuration, which I received). Having discovered that the common output power specifications do not correlate perfectly with an amp's ability to control bass, I reckoned their rated output of 200W average and 220W peak power into 4 ohms would work just fine with my reference Wilson Alexia Vs.

Options, we have options

Each MRE 220 SE monoblock uses four power output tubes—KT88s, KT120s, or KT150s are recommended and available from Octave—and three driver tubes: one 6SN7GTB (a 6SN7 with a maximum plate voltage that's 50% higher) and two ECC802s.[5] A few options are offered with the MRE 220 SE that can affect its sound.

POWER TUBES. You can choose among KT88 (supplied with the base unit), KT120 (adds $800/set), or KT150 (adds $1600/set). During an extended Zoom interview with Quick and Octave founder/chief designer Andreas Hofmann, Hofmann said, "To my ears, KT88 sounds quite a little bit soft. Sound and quality-wise, KT150 is best. But it's also a question of the speaker and the quality of the system. If somebody has a less-demanding system than yours, the top is sharp, or the sound is darker, they may prefer KT88."

POWER SUPPLY. You can boost the capacity of the MRE 220 SE's internal power supply via an external capacitor bank called the Super Black Box[6] (adds $7000/pair). The Super Black Box connects to the amp via a flexible, screw-on umbilical cord. Adding the SBB to the MRE takes only a few minutes.

The manual says the Super Black Box "significantly increases power supply capacitance to stabilize current delivery and reduce impedance interaction of the load, thus improving dynamic range, separation, depth, soundstage size and articulation. This enables optimizing the MRE 220 in respect to the speaker, which is a tremendous benefit if the speaker is difficult to drive."

INPUT CHOICE. The choice of XLR or RCA will have sonic consequences. Which is better? Octave's Michael Nonnenmann wrote, "We do not prefer any connection method. It depends on what devices you use. Please test for yourself which connection sounds best." Because I was using a dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC as my volume control, I was able to try both options. More on this topic follows.

(In addition to RCA and XLR inputs, the Octave MRE 220 SE has optional RCA 2 input designed to reduce hum and eliminate signal ground/protective ground issues in some countries. RCA 2 is not recommended for US users.)

PASSIVE FILTER. Octave makes a relatively compact but hefty passive filter called the Filter 3-P ($3000), designed to be inserted in the analog interconnect path between a preamp and each SE 220. (It can also be used between preamps and DACs.) The Filter 3-P is designed "to eliminate the problem of propagation of conducted electromagnetic interference," which travels in both directions on ground lines. There are different filters for users of RCA and XLR

3 See bit.ly/OctaveMonoSE. These were recently replaced by the Jubilee Mono Ultimate monoblocks.

4 MRE stands for "Mono Röhren Endstufe," the German words for "Mono Tube Amplifier." SE stands for "Second Edition;" the monoblock's predecessor was the MRE 220.

5 ECC802 = ECC 82, 12AU7, 5814, or 6189.

6 A less-expensive, lower-capacity Black Box external capacitor bank is available, but it is not recommended for use with the MRE 220 SE.

MEASUREMENTS

I measured a different sample of the Octave Audio MRE 220 SE to that auditioned by JVS. Mine had the serial number 412182330. JVS had told me that he performed his critical auditioning with the balanced input, the Power switch set to High, the damping factor set to DF Low, the Ground Lift switch in the Connected position, and with the amplifier connected to the Super Black Box external supply. I performed a full set of measurements in that condition, then repeated some of the tests with the single-ended input, then with the damping set to DF High, and finally without the Super Black Box.[1]

The four KT150 output tubes were not marked, but I followed the guide in their box to install them correctly. I let the amplifier warm up for an hour, then followed the instructions in the manual to make sure that the bias was set correctly for each tube. I then started the testing with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system.[2]

The amplifier preserved absolute polarity with both the balanced and unbalanced inputs. With DF Low, the gain into 8 ohms from the single pair of output terminals was 27.5dB for both input types. DF High reduced the gain by 1dB. The balanced input impedance is specified as 50k ohms, which was confirmed by my measurements. The single-ended input's impedance, specified as 25k ohms, was 44k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, dropping inconsequentially to 29k ohms at the top of the audioband.

The amplifier's output impedance in DF Low mode, including 6' of spaced-pair speaker cable, was a high 1.87 ohms in the bass and midrange, rising to 2.7 ohms at 20kHz. Consequently, the modulation of the MRE 220 SE's frequency response due to the Ohm's law interaction between

1 I powered down the MRE 220 SE before disconnecting the Super Black Box, then waited for 30 minutes after powering up the amplifier before repeating the testing. I did the same when changing the damping factor from Low to High.

2 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

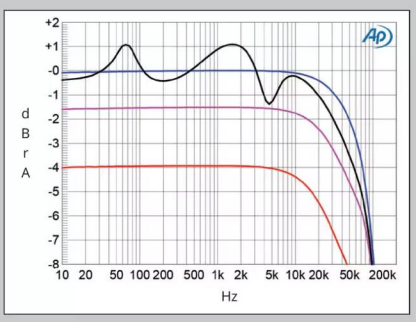

Fig.1 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red) (1dB/vertical div.).

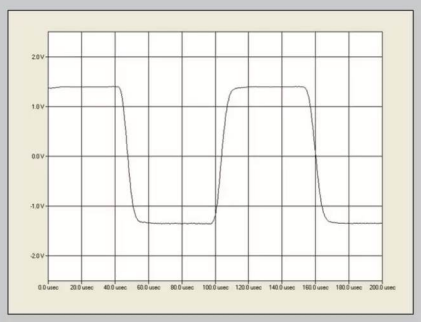

Fig.2 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, small-signal, 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

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interconnects; mine was designed for XLR.[7] "It's a special type of transformer with a high capability to block the high frequencies," Hofmann explained. "The so-called common-mode rejection ratio (CMMR) is quite high. The frequency range is flat up to 100kHz, but it blocks high-frequency distortions from the mains that travel in both directions on the ground, from the network, and so on. You can also use it between the DAC and the input section of the preamp to address jitter that can mask details." The Filter 3-P requires an additional set of interconnects.

GROUND-LIFT SWITCH. It's on the rear panel. When in the "connected" position, ground resistance is 0 ohms; in the "disconnected" position, it is 18 ohms. In normal use, when no ground-related hum is present, the "connected" position is appropriate. "All manufacturers, including cable manufacturers, treat grounding differently," Hofmann said. "Cable capacitance can create high-frequency distortions on the ground line, and components' internal circuitry can

7 I wanted to evaluate the Filter 3-P with RCA interconnects but couldn't get a broken-in sample in time.

measurements, continued

this impedance and that of our standard simulated loudspeaker[3] was ±1.1dB (fig.1, gray trace). The amplifier's response into 8 ohms (blue trace) was flat in the audioband, rolling off above 20kHz to reach –3dB at 65kHz. Fig.1 was taken with the balanced input. The response with the unbalanced inputs was very similar, though the –3dB point dropped slightly, to 58kHz. The MRE 220 SE's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave in DF Low mode was free from overshoot or ringing (fig.2).

The output impedance in DF High mode was half that in DF Low mode. The modulation of the amplifier's frequency response into the simulated loudspeaker therefore varied by ±0.7dB (fig.3, gray trace). The response in this mode extended significantly higher in frequency into 8 ohms (blue trace), with the output down by 3dB at 100kHz. A small peak at 70kHz started to develop into 2 ohms (red trace), though the output started to roll off much earlier in frequency than into 8 ohms.

The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, taken with either the balanced input or the unbalanced input shorted to ground and with the Super Black Box supply, was a good 75.7dB ref. 2.83V, which is equivalent to 1W into 8 ohms. This ratio improved slightly, to 77.6dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to the audioband, and to 79.1dB when A-weighted. The S/N ratios were very similar without the

3 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

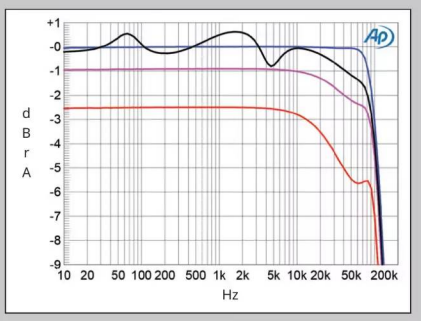

Fig.3 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF High, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red) (1dB/vertical div.).

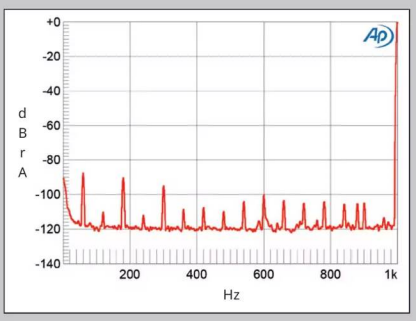

Fig.4 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1Wpc into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

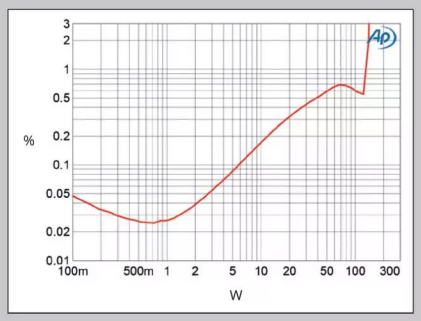

Fig.5 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

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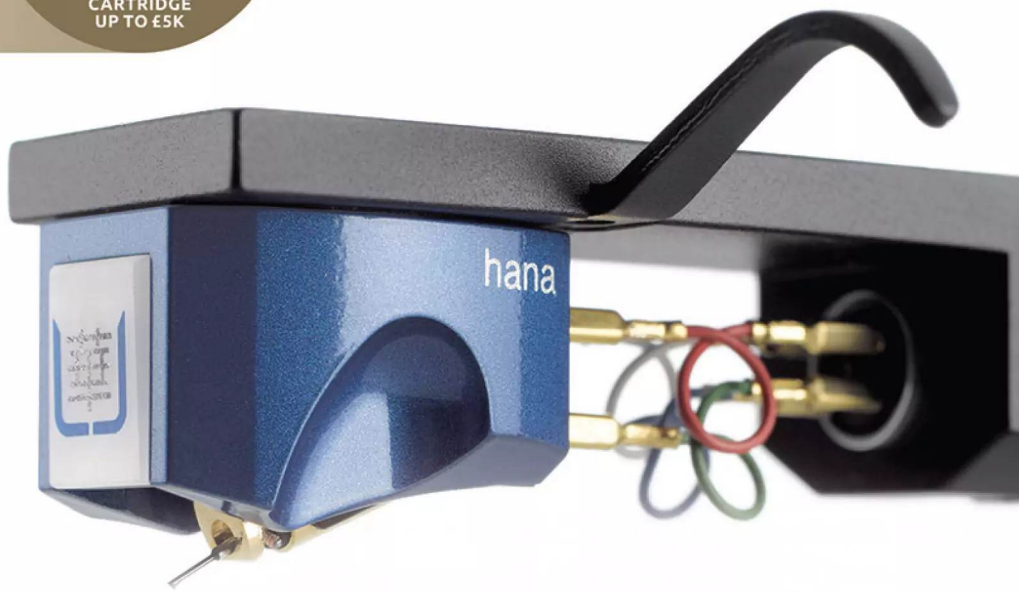

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sometimes float above the main earth ground. Some manufacturers reverse pins on XLR, which can cause problems, and some use two-prong power cords that lack a third wire for an independent ground. Even the network may not be properly grounded."

"Issues can develop when you join together the grounds of different components," Quick added. "Ground loops can arise when monoblocks and source components are plugged into different circuits. Lifting the ground allows interconnects to ground everything to one place rather than multiple places that may have different ground potentials." Depending on the precise cause, that may get rid of any ground-loop hum.

ADJUSTABLE DAMPING FACTOR. The SE 220 has an adjustable high/low damping factor to, in the words of the website, "adapt ... to [and] ideally suit the higher demands of modern loudspeakers." The factory setting is "low."

"With low or reduced feedback, the damping factor is very low," Hofmann said. "In my opinion, a good speaker with good magnetic efficiency like your Wilsons does not require a high damping factor. As much as an amplifier controls the sound, the loudspeaker system must have its own control. Otherwise, it's a poor design. A few exotic or old speakers—an old B&W or Dynaudio, for example—need a high damping factor; the newer Dynaudios do not."

"I've designed amplifiers for 20 or 30 years, and I still feel that we need a certain amount of feedback and a bit of damping, but not too much. Otherwise, the midrange sounds flat or less than good. Adjusting feedback is a very, very sensitive thing. Too many amplifiers have too high a damping factor and too much feedback. Too much feedback kills the sound."

Layout, features, and biasing

The 220 SE arrives with a protective grille over the tubes. The product manual declares, "Operating the amplifier without its protective grille is dangerous and not recommended." Quick gave the okay to remove the grilles.

A small power-rocker switch is located on the left side of the amplifier, close to the front. The front panel holds two large selector knobs. The left knob selects input (RCA 1, RCA 2, XLR, or Mute; you can connect or change cables with the switch in the Mute position, without switching off the amplifier).

The right knob selects one of the four tubes, "V 4, V 3, V 2, or V 1," for biasing. It can also put the amp in either "Eco off" or "Eco on" mode. In "Eco on," the amp remains fully warmed up and ready for use unless no signal is present for approximately 10 minutes. After that, it enters sleep mode, draws 20W idle current, and produces very little heat. When a music signal is detected, the Eco mode circuit powers the unit back on with a 20–30 second warm-up/start-up delay. Eco mode is said to increase tube life and ensure that nothing bad or dangerous happens when you leave the amp switched on. Tube-biasing is only possible with "Eco off."

Pre-measured tubes arrive in a separate box, with amplifier positions labeled for the power tubes. If you use these, you're golden. If you want to roll tubes, manual bias adjustment is necessary. Turn the front-panel bias selector knob to the tube you wish to bias, then use the supplied small screwdriver to adjust the trimmer screw next to the tube. Yellow and green LEDs located between tubes V2 and V3 indicate if bias is too low, correct, or too high. Combinations of yellow and green allow you to tweak bias higher and lower according to tube choice and loudspeaker type. Sayeth the manual, "Certain loudspeakers may benefit from the higher bias current, as it will increase the damping factor and provide slightly better control of the speakers." BIAS Low corresponds to a plate current of 33mA, and BIAS high to a plate current of 40mA.

measurements, continued

Super Black Box. Fig.4 shows the spectrum of the amplifier's low-frequency noisefloor at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with the Super Black Box. The level of random noise is low, and while odd-order harmonics of the AC supply frequency are present, presumably due to magnetic interference from the power transformer, these all lie at or below –90dB.

Octave specifies the maximum power with KT150s and the High power setting as 200W into 4 ohms (20dBW), 20% lower into 8 ohms. Fig.5 plots how the THD+noise percentage with the Super Black Box varies with output power into 8 ohms. The THD+N rises with increasing power above 0.7W, reaching 1%, our usual definition of clipping, at 130W (21.1dBW). Fig.6 repeats the THD+N measurement into 4 ohms. The THD+N reaches 1% at 114W (17.56dBW) and 3% at 203W (20.06dBW). The only difference that I noted when I repeated these tests without the Super Black Box was that the maximum power into 4 ohms was 190W at 3% THD+N (19.8dBW). The shapes of the traces with and without the Super Black Box were identical, with the roughly linear increase in THD+N suggesting that the circuit uses little or no global loop feedback. With the damping factor set to High, the maximum power into 4 ohms was the same as with it set to Low. However, the distortion at moderate powers was lower (fig.7).

Fig.8 shows how the THD+N percentage changed with frequency at 8.95V, equivalent to 10W into 8 ohms, 20W into 4 ohms, and 40W into 2 ohms. The distortion into 8 ohms (blue trace) is around 0.18% over

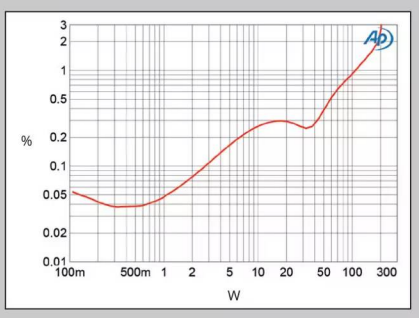

Fig.6 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

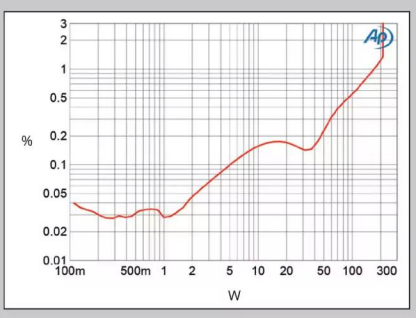

Fig.7 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF High, Super Black Box, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

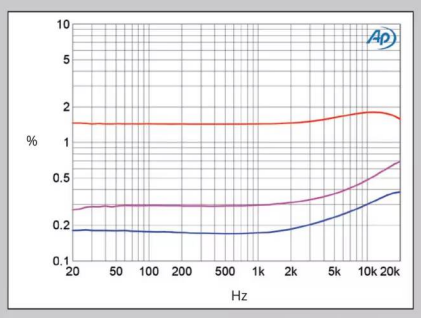

Fig.8 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 8.95V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), 2 ohms (red).

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After biasing the tubes, you can set the right knob to "Eco off" and start listening right away. Alternately, you can remain in "Eco on" and, after a short pause when the start-delay circuit kicks in, signal will begin traveling to your speakers. In either scenario, sound will continually improve over the first 12–15 minutes, until the amps are fully warmed up.

The rear panel contains XLR (pin 2 is positive) and RCA inputs; that ground-lift toggle switch; loudspeaker outputs that accept either spade or 4mm banana connectors; and a place to connect an umbilical cord to the Super Black Box. There's also a "HIGH – 200W / LOW – 140W" power selector. KT120 and KT150 tubes require the high setting while regular KT88s require low; Octave's preferred KT88 S4A Carbon can use either setting. Rounding things out are the serial number and an IEC socket with an integrated fuse holder.

Additional design details

In contrast to most tube amps, it's okay to operate the MRE 220 with no loudspeaker connected because "The MRE 220, like all Octave amplifiers, is fully protected against open circuit operation, ie, the amplifier will come to no harm if it is operated without loudspeakers connected and the input level is in the magnitude of normal listening levels." The amp's soft-start technology is said to greatly extend tube life; tubes "normally sound the same throughout their service life." When an output tube has reached the end of its useful life, you won't be able to adjust the bias correctly.

Octave's website[8] declares that the MRE 220 SE mono power amplifiers have been "completely redesigned" relative to the non-SE versions, with a new power supply and output transformer section design. The company says the amplifier is stable down to a loudspeaker impedance of 2.5 ohms and that its S/N ratio is > 116dB (no ref. level specified). The manual touts the amplifier's double-sided PCB with plated-through holes using 70µm copper, ceramic tube bases with silver contacts, specially selected and burned-in long-life tubes, and professional low-inductance electrolytic capacitors.

I asked Hofmann if he had different design goals for his larger and more costly Jubilee floorstanding monoblocks. "The MRE 220 SE is, in my opinion, the best compromise we can produce in terms of dimensions, price, and power," he answered. "The sonic goals are the same, but with the Ultimate, I want to expand an amplifier's possibilities as much as possible in terms of dynamics, power bandwidth, and so on. That requires a big amplifier with eight tubes, more power from an oversized power supply, and most important, an extremely oversized output transformer. The Jubilee's power bandwidth goes well below 20Hz; this works well when everyone in a big orchestra starts to play at once and this huge shockwave of sound, with frequencies below 20Hz, comes out easily and naturally from the speakers. You cannot hear these frequencies directly, but you can feel them when classical or pop music goes very, very deep.

"Reproducing them correctly also requires less phase shift and less distortion. Everything must be in time and in phase. There is so much information in the lowest frequencies; I think it has more importance than the frequencies above 100kHz. Correct phase response and phase shift at full power contribute greatly to sonic integrity."

What occasioned the redesign of his less expensive monoblocks? "The MRE 220 SE is a refinement of its predecessor, the MRE 220, which was available for close to eight years. After its release, as I worked with different systems and setups, I learned how to improve some aspects of the push-pull design that affected feedback

8 See octave.de/en/products/poweramplifier/mre-220-se.

measurements, continued

most of the audioband, with an increase in the top octaves. The THD+N percentage rises to 0.3% into 4 ohms (magenta trace), and to 1.6% into 2 ohms (red trace). Repeating this measurement without the Super Black Box gave an identical result, though with the damping factor set to High, the THD+N into 8 ohms averaged 0.09% in the bass and midrange.

The THD+N waveform at 20W into 8 ohms was primarily the third harmonic (fig.9), at –50dB (0.3%, fig.10), though the second harmonic is also present at –67dB. Even into 4 ohms, the second-order difference product at 1kHz with an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones was relatively low, at –66dB (0.05%) ref. a peak level of 20W (fig.11). However, the higher-order intermodulation distortion products at 18kHz and 21kHz lay at –56dB (0.15%). There is a peculiar rise in power-supply–related spuriae between 3kHz and 8kHz visible in this graph, though these all lie below –104dB. I repeated the test with the ground connection lifted and with the single-ended input, but this behavior didn't change.

The measured performance of Octave Audio's MRE 220 SE is typical of a tubed amplifier that doesn't use a large amount of corrective loop negative feedback. But the highish level of distortion into 2 ohms, even though it's the relatively innocuous third harmonic, suggests that the amplifier shouldn't be used with loudspeakers whose impedance drops much below 4 ohms.—**John Atkinson**

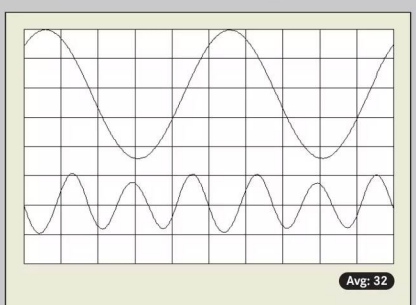

Fig.9 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, 1kHz waveform at 20W into 8 ohms, 0.32% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

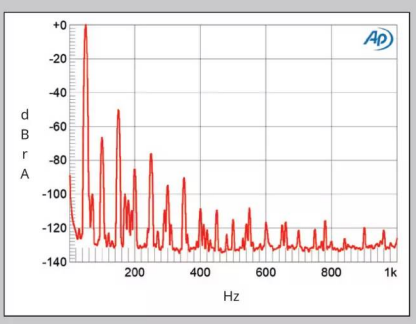

Fig.10 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 20W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

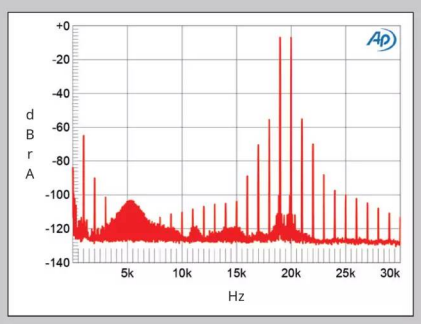

Fig.11 Octave MRE 220 SE, DF Low, Super Black Box, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 20Wpc peak into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).

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and stability. A good amplifier is a stable amplifier that always has good sound, independent of the speaker. I've made the two signal passes for the plus and the minus push-pull transients as equal as possible. The midrange and even the high frequencies and bass sound clearer and more natural. Body and image size have improved."

XLR or RCA, that is a question

The answer is different than Hamlet's, and the consequences aren't tragic. The Octave MRE 220 SE, whose input stage is single-ended (unbalanced), offers users a choice between XLR (balanced) and RCA (single-ended) inputs. "Andreas feels the best way to design an amplifier's main amplification/power gain stage is to make it single-ended (unbalanced)," Quick said. "As a result, the balanced input includes an additional circuit that converts incoming signals from balanced to unbalanced. To Andreas's way of thinking, using a high-quality converter circuit based on an op-amp, which is the most linear, quiet, and consistent way to convert between single-ended and balanced, is the right solution."

Hofmann affirmed Quick's explanation, offering that "The converter has a minor effect on the sound, but this can still be positive. You cannot say that sound gets worse with the op-amp, because ours is professional grade, not a cheap part, that acts as a professional balanced-to-unbalanced converter.

"Ultimately, the sound depends on the source, on the preamp, and on the DAC. What is the balanced output of the particular brands in your system, and how is the sound affected by the length of the cable, its susceptibility to distortion, and the grounding? Even the power supply of the DAC can have a sonic effect if there is noise on the ground line. There are so many factors at play that it's difficult to predict which will sound better."

In a subsequent email, Quick pointed out an additional advantage of the balanced-to-unbalanced converter circuit. "The MRE 220 SE's XLR input circuit also serves to make levels between XLR and RCA sources more similar without simply shunting half the original signal to ground. This decision maintains more of the original balanced source's signal integrity."

Installation Pt.1

My sample arrived with KT150s and Super Black Boxes. Separately, I received a broken-in Filter 3-P that would accept XLR interconnects.

Hofmann does not feel that Octave amplifiers need additional power conditioning. Nonetheless, if someone prefers the sound through their favored power product, he's okay with that. Because work with Edward DeVito of Audio-Ultra has greatly improved my electrical setup, I plugged the amps directly into the wall. I anticipate further work shortly that will upgrade the dedicated wiring and increase the number of circuits.

The Octave MRE 220 SE's footers are, in Quick's words, "not meant to be anything particularly special, just functional." I could say the same about the footers on my reference amps.[9] Because I'm enamored of Wilson Audio Pedestals and use them under virtually every component, I placed them under the MRE 220 SEs. I had a spare set of four that I divided between the two Super Black Boxes. With trial and error, I managed to get them to balance.

I streamed music from Qobuz, Tidal, or my NAS through my optical network and a Nordost QNet switch to the Innuos Statement NG music server/streamer. I also played files stored on the Innuos's internal SSD. From the Statement, the signal proceeded through the three-piece dCS Vivaldi Apex stack to the Octave MRE 220 SEs through top-level Nordost and AudioQuest cabling.

Because the Vivaldi Apex DAC has both RCA and XLR outputs, I tried both. When I output from Vivaldi to monoblocks through RCA, I easily connected my Wilson Lōkē subwoofers with XLR-terminated subwoofer cables; when I output to the monoblocks through XLR, I used Cardas XLR-to-RCA adapters to send signal through RCA to the subs.

During the review period, I learned what might happen if I floated the ground or switched the damping factor. I also evaluated sonic differences between XLR and RCA inputs *in my system with my components*, the effects of the Filter 3-P *in my system* when XLR interconnects were in use, and the benefits of the Super Black Box power supply. Your mileage may vary.

Installation Pt.2

Quick spent several days in Port Townsend checking out my reference system, installing the amps, and listening. We took our first listen using XLR interconnects. A grand symphony by Mahler sounded anemic, skeletal, and stripped to the bone. Notes came through dimly, shorn of overtones, body, color, and musical essence. I feared I had no choice but to declare the Octave MRE 220 SE monoblocks system-incompatible.

Stereophile's review policy is firm: Do not discuss what you hear with anyone supplying the gear, or anyone else. If you suspect something's wrong, say nothing, consult editor Jim Austin, and go from there. Which doesn't mean that I don't find it difficult to keep a straight face as I witness the desecration of music I love while an

9 Many manufacturers understand that their customers will likely use their favorite aftermarket footers regardless of what manufacturers provide; others insist that aftermarket footers not be used.

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intelligent, discerning distributor I know well sits next to me, hearing what I was hearing.

Thankfully, Quick immediately heard that something was way off and proposed potential solutions. First, he explained that he had installed the amps with the ground lifted. "Because your amplifiers were plugged into the wall, the rest of your system was plugged into the Stromtank S 2500 Quantum Mk. II, and some units were connected to Nordost QKore ground units, I thought the amps might sound better with the ground lifted," he said. "Let's see what happens if I engage the ground."

Two switch-flips later, the improvement was major. There was nothing subtle about the transformation. Although intuition suggested that more could be done, I could allow my shoulders to drop most of the way down from beside my ear canals.

"I also set the damping factor to high," Quick said. "Let's switch it to low." I breathed a sigh of relief as I expressed my eagerness to proceed with the review.

With the Filter in, the tribal nature of some of the movements and a multilayered acoustic that invoked a huge gothic church came through strongly.

Let the music play

First on my musical agenda was a review of the new Takács Quartet recording of *Schubert: String Quartet No.15 in G major D887* • *String Quartet No.8 in B flat major D112* (24/96 WAV download, Hyperion, available as CD). In No.15, written two years before the composer's death, the Takács's soft playing was remarkable for its control and sensitivity. Passages of heartbreaking tenderness washed over me, touching the core of my being. As Schubert's joy ceded to pain and came back again, I sat transfixed.

Reviewer mode kicked in, and I couldn't stop myself from changing the interconnects to RCA. With RCA, the sound was more neutral—less overtly warm—than with XLR, and colors seemed more varied. Images weren't as big, nor the presentation as transparent as through my far more costly reference amplifiers, but the music's beauty and emotion came through clearly. I felt totally confident that I was hearing what I needed to hear—and feeling what I needed to feel—to assess the recording.

Shortly after I reviewed[10] pianist Simon Trpčeski's fabulous performance of the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No.1, with the Seattle Symphony under guest conductor Osmo Vänskä, my blessed friend Scott arrived for a listen. I cued up a private recording by Peter McGrath of Trpčeski performing Prokofiev Sonata No.7 on May 2, 2023, in Miami (24/176.4 MQA). The interconnects were XLR, the soundstage was wide, and the sound was warm and inviting. Every note of the piano was solid.

When we inserted Filter 3-P, it softened the piano's leading edge—great for bright systems—truncated harmonics, and lessened air, depth, and the rate of decay of those lovely reverb tails. When I played Mahler's "Revelge" from baritone Samuel Hasselhorn and the Poznań Philharmonic's new recording, *Urlicht* (24/96 WAV download, Harmonia Mundi), Filter 3-P seemed to muddy the orchestra's lowest notes. On the heavily overdubbed *Maya Beiser X Terry Riley: In C* (24/48 WAV download, Islandia Music), some lines were smudged, some colors diminished. Layers and textures clarified when I removed the filter.

Nonetheless, with the Filter in, the tribal nature of some of the movements and a multilayered acoustic that invoked a huge gothic

10 See classicalvoiceamerica.org/2024/03/25/as-orchestra-searches-for-helmsman-vanska-proves-its-not-adrift.

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church came through strongly. Perhaps in systems burdened with electromagnetic interference, electrically conducted noise, and the like, the Filter 3-P's positive effects will outweigh other considerations. In my system, it seemed best to proceed without it.

Time for a tried and true, Mahler Symphony No.4 performed on period-appropriate instruments by Les Siècles under François-Xavier Roth (24/96 WAV download, Harmonia Mundi). Through XLR, timbres were warm and colorful. All but the lowest bass was tightly focused. I loved what I heard. Yusef Lateef's continually fascinating *Eastern Sounds*, remastered in 2023 (24/192 FLAC, Craft Recordings/Qobuz), made both Scott and me very happy.

A few days later, as I sat at the computer at 9:15am, a series of rapid off/on electrical flickers—so quick that my computer didn't shut down or reboot—precipitated a 45-minute internet outage. When I visited the music room, I found the EtherREGEN at the end of my optical network fried and the Nordost QSource linear power supply that fed it so hot I needed gloves to move it.

With streaming temporarily off the table, I played files stored on the Innuos Statement NG's SSD. Thankfully, 4TB is a lot of music. Meanwhile, I took advantage of the disaster to speak with Dennis Bonotto of Nordost and John Giolas of dCS about optimal power cable connections.

On my first new listen, I felt as though I had entered a magical kingdom—as if I had passed through the Looking Glass into Wonderland. It was like listening through a crystal ball. The music sparkled. Voices were unusually clear, open, and lustrous. On DSD64 files of mezzo-soprano Alice Coote and the Netherlands Philharmonic under Marc Albrecht performing two songs from Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer), from *Mahler Song Cycles* (DSD64 download, Pentatone), the mezzo's voice sounded clearer than I'd ever heard it.

I felt called to embark on an Henri Duparc journey. I played three versions of his great song "Chanson triste" (Song of Sadness). First came mezzo-soprano Marianne Crebassa with Fazil Say on the piano, from *Secrets* (24/96 FLAC, Warner/Qobuz). Her voice was cool and grounded, beautiful on top, and quite touching. Then came a true French master, baritone Charles Panzéra, on an edgy digital transfer of a 1927 recording (collected on Pearl GEMM CD 9300), making music out of language, treating every word and note with equal importance, savoring every syllable and vowel as though it were a fine wine, and lingering idiomatically in passages modern singers sing straight through.

Finally, from *Reflet* (24/96 WAV download, Alpha), the wonderful soprano Sandrine Piau, with Orchestre Victor Hugo conducted by Jean-François Verdier, alchemically transformed each high note into a dew-kissed flower opening in the morning sun as it beckoned bees and poets to drink its nectar. Piau may not share Panzéra's gift of *rallentando*, but her voice matches it for beauty. I left the music room dazed, as if in a dream, to walk the dogs in the dark under a star-filled sky in the still-chilly early spring.

Time for a pause to evaluate the effects of the Super Black Box. Without it, instruments sounded smaller and less impactful. Air diminished, low bass became lighter in weight. It felt as though I was listening through an inferior amplifier. I suppose I was. It's irrefutable: The Super Black Box significantly elevates the Octave MRE 220 SE monoblocks' ability to deliver musical satisfaction.

When Scott and I listened with the RCA interconnects to Ike Quebec and friends playing "Minor Impulse" from *Blue & Sentimental (Remastered 2007/Rudy Van Gelder Edition)* (24/192 FLAC, Blue Note/Tidal), we felt that low bass could have been a mite tighter. Nonetheless, color, detail, and musicality were so satisfying that I felt the best way to bid the MRE 220 SEs farewell was to play the moving *Adagietto* from Mahler's Symphony No.5 with the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal under Rafael Payare (24/96 FLAC download, Pentatone), sigh, and bask in the beautiful flow of massed strings. What better way to say goodbye than with heartfelt beauty?

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, Vivaldi Master Clock, and Rossini Transport; EMM Labs DV2 Integrated DAC, Meitner MA3 Integrated DAC; Innuos Statement Next-Gen Music Server; Small Green Computer Sonore Deluxe opticalModule (2); Uptone Audio EtherREGEN with SOtM sCLK-OCX10 Master Clock and sPS-500 power supply; Broadcom/Avago AFBR-5718PZ 1GB SX-SFP, Gen 5 Fiber Optic modules; Nordost QNet switch and QSource linear power supplies (2); Sonore Audiophile Linear Power Supply; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS with Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply; Linksys MR9000 mesh router and Arris modem; Apple 2023 iPad Pro and 2017 MacBook Pro.
Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks, Accuphase A-300 monoblocks.
Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V with Lōkē subwoofers.
Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature; Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiberoptic). Interconnect (XLR): Nordost Odin 2 and Blue Heaven subwoofer, AudioQuest Dragon, Canare (subwoofers). Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2, Valhalla 1; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird; Kimber PK10 Palladian. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare on NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources; SOtM sPS-500 umbilical cable for SOtM Master clock.
Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20 amp QB8 Mark III, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MK II power generator, SEQ-5 Audio Distribution Bar; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; Environmental Potentials EP2050EE surge protector/filter; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService Polyflex Diffusers; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stillpoints Clouds (8); HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Marigo Aida CD mat.
Dedicated listening room 20' L × 16' W × 9'4" H.
—Jason Victor Serinus

Summing up

With my unique equipment configuration and setup, it felt as though I was reviewing two closely related albeit different monoblocks. Fed by XLR, the Octave MRE 220 SEs sounded warm, round, and full; fed by RCA, they sounded more neutral, with more varied colors but a bit less substantial. In both cases, their beauty of sound and ability to communicate music's transformative essence won out over other considerations.

You'll definitely want to use the Super Black Box to hear all these babies can do. It absolutely lifts the amplifiers to a level that many components aspire to and few achieve: Easy on the ear, satisfying to mind and body, capable of reaching into music's heart and sharing it with all who listen. There's a palpable yet paradoxically intangible truth to the sound of the Octave MRE 220 SE mono tube amplifiers that makes them an easy, solid recommendation to music lovers of all stripes. ■

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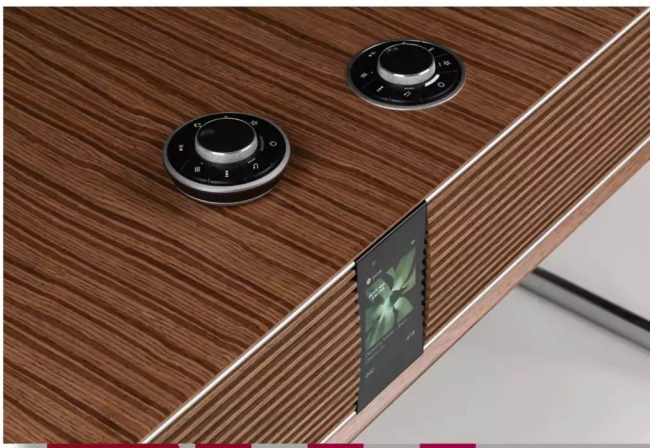

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SASHA MATSON

McIntosh ML1 Mk II

LOUDSPEAKER

What was old is new again.

McIntosh Laboratories has been in business long enough that they are able to bring new design thinking, materials, and construction methods to products from their extensive back catalog. Example: McIntosh's first successful loudspeaker, the ML1. The venerable Binghamton, New York, hi-fi company recently released a redesigned "Mk II" version ($12,000/pair, stands included).

In this, McIntosh is not unique; KLH, JBL, Klipsch, and other companies have rethought and reworked vintage products for the current marketplace, employing new approaches and technologies. Think of it as remastering classic hardware.

I asked McIntosh President Charlie Randall how he thought about the process of updating and reissuing classic designs. His response: "We always pick products that have been pivotal in McIntosh's history, as well as products that are timeless in performance. Obviously, we incorporate new parts and materials to bring the products up to today's standards. There is a careful balance between protecting the past and playing in the present so as not

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Four-way acoustic suspension, floorstanding speaker system. Drive units: One 12" polypropylene-cone woofer; two 4" polypropylene-cone lower midrange drivers; one 2" soft-cloth–dome upper-midrange driver, and one 3/4" (20mm) treated titanium-dome tweeter. Crossover frequencies: 180Hz, 500Hz, 4500Hz. Sensitivity: 85dB/2.83V/m. Nominal impedance: 8 ohms. Max. power handling: 600Wpc. Frequency range: 27Hz–45kHz.
Dimensions 26 1/8" (664mm) H × 15" (381mm) W × 13 3/8" (340mm) D. Weight: 66lb (30kg). Stands: 19lb (8.6kg).
Serial numbers of units reviewed BBB1256, BBB1257. Designed and manufactured in USA.
Price $12,000/pair. Approximate number of dealers: >200. Warranty: Two years limited, transferable.
Manufacturer
McIntosh Laboratory Inc.,
2 Chambers St.,
Binghamton, NY 13903.
Tel: (607) 723-3512.
Web: mcintoshlabs.com.

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to diminish the brand."

Then and now

Ken Kessler's handsome, thorough book on McIntosh history, *McIntosh—For the Love of Music*, spells out the details. McIntosh made one earlier attempt to design a speaker, the three-way F100 from 1952,[1] but it was not considered a success and was quickly discontinued. After that, the company stuck to electronics until about 1970, when Roger Russell, then McIntosh's chief acoustical engineer, designed the ML1, a sealed-box, acoustic suspension, four-way loudspeaker featuring a 12" woofer. Russell's design included companion equalizers that were intended to enhance the bass performance. Russell has described his technical work in detail in his own online history of McIntosh.[2]

Many but not all of the ML1 loudspeaker's features are retained in the ML1 Mk II. Like its ancestor, the ML1 Mk II is built into a sealed-cabinet acoustic suspension enclosure. The dimensions are unchanged: 26" high, 15" wide, and 13 1/2" deep. That's bigger than a typical bookshelf speaker but much shorter than you'd expect a floorstander to be. One of the simplest, most important improvements offered with the new model are dedicated stands, which get the speakers up off the floor and rake them back, for much better on-axis behavior in most listening setups. The stands are labeled at the bottom front with a striking, diecast-aluminum McIntosh badge. Each speaker weighs 66lb, and each stand adds 19lb. Around back are two pairs of McIntosh's excellent gold-plated speaker taps, allowing for biwiring or biamping.

The exterior surfaces of both the cabinets and stands are finished in an oiled satin veneer of American Walnut. The substantial, detachable grille plates are framed with thick slices of that same walnut—solid, not veneer—held in place by powerful neodymium magnets. The louver-blind design of the earlier grilles has been replaced with a simpler, more sonically transparent stiff-mesh grille material made from a coated, weblike fabric that's said to be tough enough to afford protection from toddlers and cats.

Sturdily ensconced on twin legs, the ML1 exhibits personality, as if it was about to start trotting around the room. Some people have described the look as retro, and it certainly has that Arts and Crafts–era vibe. If you are seeking a speaker with a hi-tech, sci-fi look, you'd best look elsewhere.

Beneath the surface

Most of the changes from the earlier ML1 are under the hood. The earlier ML1 employed four drivers; now there are five. A key element common to both is a 12" woofer in its own sealed-interior enclosure. There are two 4" lower-midrange drivers—the earlier model employed a single 8". Higher frequencies are handled by a 2" soft-dome upper midrange and a 20mm (roughly 0.8") treated-titanium dome tweeter. The earlier version's paper (for the cones)

1 An interesting if random observation: Ford Motor Company's F100 was introduced the following year, in 1953.—**Jim Austin**

2 See roger-russell.com.

MEASUREMENTS

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system, a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone, and an Earthworks microphone preamplifier to measure the quasi-anechoic frequency- and time-domain behavior of one of the McIntosh ML1 Mk IIs—serial number BBB1256—in the farfield. The manual doesn't mention the preferred listening axis. However, although the tweeter is a low 31.75" from the floor with the loudspeaker sitting on its stand, the stand's slight tiltback will aim the tweeter at the ears of a typical seated listener. I therefore performed the farfield measurements on the tweeter axis. I used an Earthworks QTC-40 microphone, which has a ¼" capsule, for the nearfield responses, examined the loudspeaker's impedance with Dayton Audio's DATS V2 system, and investigated the enclosure's resonant modes with a plastic-tape accelerometer.

McIntosh specifies the sensitivity of the ML1 Mk II as 85dB/2.8V/m. My B-weighted estimate of the ML1's voltage sensitivity, measured on the tweeter axis, was within experimental error of that figure, at 85.4dB(B)/2.83V/m. The McIntosh ML1's nominal impedance is specified as 8 ohms. The impedance magnitude (fig.1, solid trace) remains above 8 ohms from the upper midrange through the mid-treble region, though it drops below 6 ohms in the lower midrange and upper bass. The minimum impedances were 3.77 ohms at 55Hz and 4.3 ohms at 264Hz. The electrical phase angle (fig.1, dotted trace) is occasionally high, which means that the effective resistance, or EPDR,[1] drops below 3 ohms between 32Hz and 62Hz and between 256Hz and 443Hz. The minimum EPDR values are 1.54 ohms at 42Hz and 2.15 ohms at 332Hz. Although the EPDR lies above 5 ohms above 545Hz, the ML1 will still be a relatively demanding load for the partnering amplifier, exacerbated by the lower-than-average sensitivity.

The impedance traces are free from the small discontinuities that would imply the presence of cabinet resonances. Nevertheless, I found a strong resonance at 242Hz on the back wall and sidewalls level with the midrange unit (fig.2), and a lower-level mode at 441Hz on the sidewalls level with the woofer. The highest-level mode has a high Q (Quality Factor), which will work against it having audible consequences.

The peak centered on 26Hz in the impedance magnitude trace suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the sealed-box–loaded woofer, below which the output will roll off at 12dB/octave. The blue trace in fig.3 shows the woofer's response measured in the nearfield. The peak between 30Hz and 90Hz is due to the nearfield measurement

1 EPDR is the resistive load that gives rise to the same peak dissipation in an amplifier's output devices as the loudspeaker. See "Audio Power Amplifiers for Loudspeaker Loads," *JAES*, Vol.42 No.9, September 1994, and stereophile.com/reference/707heavy/index.html.

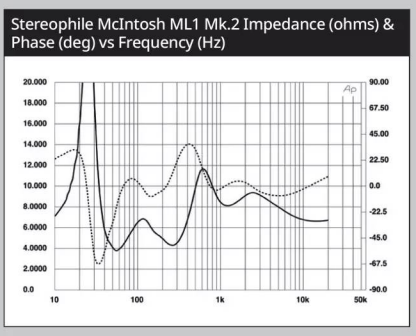

Fig.1 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

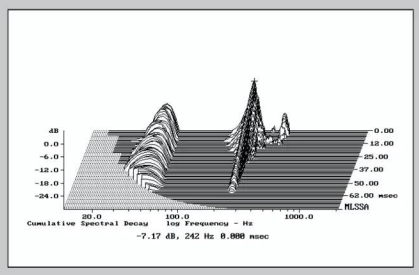

Fig.2 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to sidewall level with the midrange units (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

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and cotton (for the surrounds) have been replaced by polypropylene and rubber. The frequency range of the new speaker is specified by McIntosh as 27Hz–45kHz.

Sealed-box acoustic suspension speakers are less common today than they used to be. I asked McIntosh[3] to contrast this approach with the vented approach more often used today. "We wanted to capture as much of the original design's intentions as possible. Acoustic suspension core-design principles lie in lowering distortion through utilizing much of the very linear air spring in the sealed enclosure to control resonance. Sealed-box designs roll off at 12dB/octave below resonance. A vented design rolls off at 24dB/octave below resonance." So while a vented (bass-reflex) speaker can go lower for a given cabinet volume, the slower rolloff of a sealed box mitigates this to an extent. "At about 70% of the vent resonance frequency, the sealed system has a greater output and with a more controlled motion. That equals lower distortion."

Particularly interesting is the evolution and function of the 12" woofer. This was a key design element then, and it is now. I've never had a hi-fi loudspeaker in my

3 I actually asked specific people—not the whole company—but when answers came in by email and I asked who they should be attributed to, the answer was "McIntosh," so here you go.

measurements, continued

technique, which assumes that the baffle extends to infinity in both horizontal and vertical planes. Even so, the McIntosh ML1 offers extended low frequencies.

The woofer crosses over the two lower-midrange units (fig.3, red trace; measured in the farfield above 355Hz and in the nearfield below that frequency) at 150Hz and on to the upper-midrange driver (green trace) at the specified 500Hz. However, the output of the lower-midrange cones is slightly lower than that of the upper-midrange dome. The farfield response of the upper-midrange unit and the tweeter, taken without the grille, was generally even in the treble, though there is a strong suckout between 1kHz and 2kHz and smaller suckouts higher in frequency. The tweeter's primary dome resonance results in a response peak at 23.5kHz.

The black trace in fig.4 shows the complex sum of the woofer's and lower-midrange units' nearfield responses, spliced at 310Hz to the ML1's farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis and taken without the grille. (SM told me he preferred the sound of the McIntosh speakers without the grilles.) The blue trace in this graph repeats the spatially averaged farfield response measurement with the grille, offset by –4dB for clarity. The treble balance is even in both cases, and while the suckout between 1kHz and 2kHz is almost eliminated with the grille in place, there is now a very narrow, very deep response notch centered on 1065Hz. This notch might compensate to some extent for the excess of energy at the bottom of the upper-midrange unit's output, which is fully developed without the grille.

Predicting the effect of this response anomaly on perceived sound quality is difficult, because this will also depend on the speaker's horizontal dispersion. This, taken without the grille and normalized to the response on the tweeter axis, which therefore appears as a straight line, is shown in fig.5. This graph suggests that the upper-midrange and low-treble output evens out to the ML1's sides, though the output of the lower-midrange drops at extreme off-axis angles. Higher in frequency, the raised "lips" on the sides of the baffle

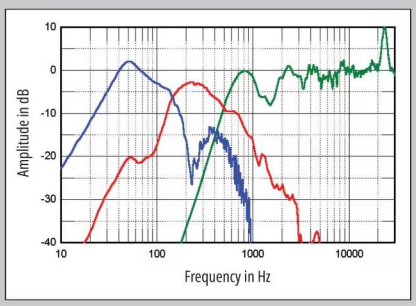

Fig.3 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, acoustic crossover on tweeter axis at 50", corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield responses of the lower midrange units (red) and woofer (blue), respectively plotted below 350Hz and 950Hz.

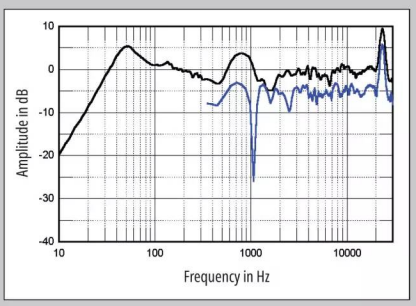

Fig.4 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the grille (black) and without the grille (blue), with the complex sum of the lower midrange and woofer nearfield responses plotted below 310Hz.

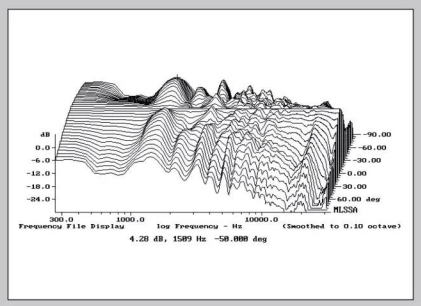

Fig.5 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, lateral response family at 50" without grille, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off axis.

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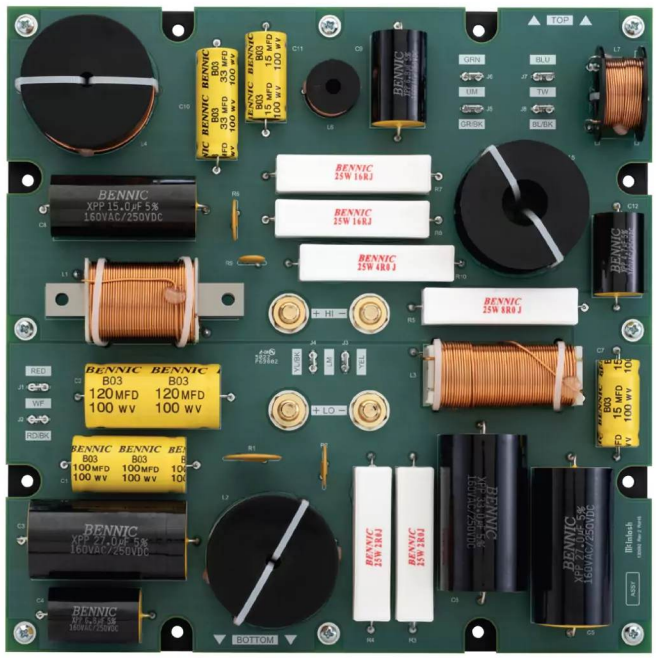
house that contained a 12" woofer. When properly constructed and powered, a 12" driver can yield a visceral "oomph" that smaller drivers have trouble matching. Back in the day, engineer Roger Russell went to great lengths, including with those outboard equalizers, to find a way to drive a loudspeaker as low as 20Hz with a flat frequency response. Today, McIntosh has achieved similar behavior using what they call their "LD/HP" (Low Distortion High Performance) Magnetic Circuit Design, which is patented. As implemented in the ML1 Mk II's new 12" woofer, LD/HP reduces second and third harmonic distortion while increasing efficiency and power handling. Other developments applied to the new woofer include a rear vent through the magnetic assembly, which improves heat dissipation, and increased space under the voice-coil and spider assembly, which helps control noise. The ceramic magnet and gap shapes are modeled for long linear excursion. The voice-coil is constructed from four layers of copper. McIntosh claims transient response that rivals woofers twice the size. (That would be a very large woofer indeed.)

The ML1 Mk II's specified maximum power



measurements, continued

without the grille results in a complicated radiation pattern, and the wide baffle narrows the tweeter's dispersion in the top two octaves. Repeating the horizontal dispersion measurements with the grille in place (not shown) results in a considerably more complex radiation pattern throughout the treble, though the notch just above 1kHz in the tweeter-axis response tends to fill in more than 10° to the speaker's sides.

Fig.6 shows the ML1's dispersion in the vertical plane, taken without the grille and again normalized to the response on the tweeter axis. This plot is difficult to interpret, but it suggests that the lack of energy between 1kHz and 2kHz on the tweeter axis fills in slightly 10° above the tweeter axis and 15° below. The cursor position in this graph indicates that the crossover between the upper-midrange unit and the tweeter lies closer to 3.7kHz than to the specified 4.5kHz.

In the time domain, the ML1's step response (fig.7) indicates that the tweeter, the lower-midrange units, and the woofer are all connected in positive acoustic polarity. The tweeter's output arrives first at the microphone and while the upper-midrange unit is connected in inverted polarity; the start of its step cleanly merges with the negative-going decay of the tweeter's step. In turn, the decay of the dome unit's step cleanly merges with the positive-going step of the lower midrange units, which indicates an optimal crossover topology. The McIntosh's step response, measured without the grille, is overlaid with small reflections. These result in ridges of delayed energy in the ML1's cumulative spectral-decay (waterfall) plot (fig.8), though this is relatively clean in the region covered by the tweeter. This was not the case with the waterfall graph taken with the grille in place (not shown), presumably due to strong reflections of the tweeter's output from the grille.

With its old-fashioned appearance, wide baffle, horizontal midrange array, and that bulky grille, it shouldn't be surprising that the McIntosh ML1 Mk II's measured performance is, for want of a better word, idiosyncratic. The results suggest that experimenting with the grilles on or off and not toeing the speakers in to the listening position will give a tonal balance that's more neutral than suggested by the on-axis behavior.—**John Atkinson**

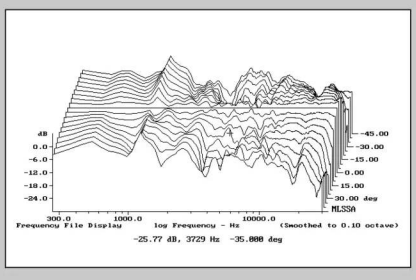


Fig.6 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, vertical response family at 50" without grille, normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 45°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–45° below axis.

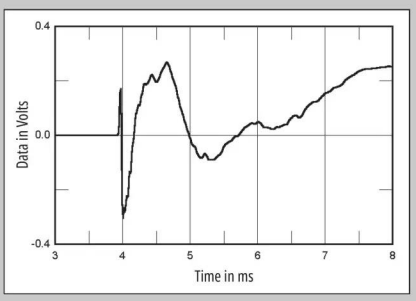


Fig.7 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, step response on tweeter axis at 50" without grille (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

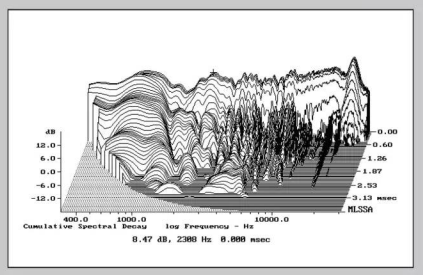


Fig.8 McIntosh ML1 Mk II, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50" without grille (0.15ms risetime).

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handling is 600W; that's a lot of power. Plus, you can rest easy in knowing that McIntosh has included self-resetting, high-current PTC fuses in the crossover network to protect the loudspeakers from damage.

The second-order crossover networks employ materials and techniques that were not available in 1970, like inductors with low DC resistance and capacitors with low equivalent series resistance. It's a four-way design—one of the most 1970s-looking things about this speaker is the proliferation of drivers on the broad front panel—with, of course, three crossover frequencies, at 180Hz, 500Hz, and 4500Hz. This combination of crossover points avoids the range in which the fundamental frequency of most vocals occurs.

Another design element that differs from the earlier version is the positioning of the upper drivers. The four in the upper part of the cabinet are placed symmetrically, mounted together on a machined aluminum plate. McIntosh claims that this results in improved imaging; I found off-axis reproduction excellent, making this a loudspeaker of choice for listeners who want to be able to enjoy their music outside the "sweet spot." McIntosh told me that the developers of the new ML1 utilized "extensive computer modelling, included on- and off-axis prediction."

Sealed enclosures are not known for sensitivity; the sensitivity rating for the ML1 Mk II is 85dB/2.83V/m, which is average. The manual recommends a minimum of 75W for amplification; McIntosh commented, "This very much depends on the average output level one wants to achieve. In a typical listening room with moderate reverberation, one should be comfortable with 200Wpc."

The stated nominal impedance is 8 ohms, which, if corroborated, would make the speaker an easy load despite the modest sensitivity. I requested and was provided with a graph of impedance behavior. There is a single peak in the low frequencies, corresponding to the woofer's resonance in the cabinet, then a mild rise to lower- and upper-midrange crossover points. The lowest point for impedance on the graph lies around 4 ohms near 50Hz. John Atkinson's measurements will reveal more.

Ready, set, listen

I have found the quality of McIntosh's shipping containers to be excellent; the ML1 Mk II was no exception. Packed in four separate boxes and quite a bit lighter than several other loudspeakers I have auditioned recently, the speakers and stands were set up in a jiffy.

A sealed cabinet is an advantage with setup, since you don't need to worry about vents interacting with room boundaries, yet jamming speakers into corners is not a good idea unless that's the designer's intention, as it is with Audio Notes and certain Klipsches. The sturdy stands come with a choice of smooth metal casters or spikes, to work with different floor types. Once the stands are sited, the speakers are easily placed on top. Once that's done, you're ready to connect wires.

Using the small wrench provided for McIntosh's excellent speaker taps made connecting a snap. It was all in the family this time, as in my Downstairs System, I currently run the McIntosh MA252 integrated amplifier, which is capable of delivering 100W into an 8 ohm load.

I view the concept of break-in with one eyebrow arched; we are crossing the line into audio voodoo here, in my opinion. However, the one component category where the idea of break-in makes most sense is with loudspeakers: The idea that moving machined parts with tight tolerances may take some time to loosen up and get in the groove seems reasonable to me. I admire my fellow audio writers who have the willpower to let things run in for days or weeks before they pay any attention to it, but I'm too impatient usually—with something new, I want to hear results right away.

The ML1 Mk II's came to me new from the McIntosh plant in nearby Binghamton. When I first fired up the ML1 Mk II's, I picked something to play at random. I don't even recall what the recording was. My initial reaction: The upper-mids seemed a bit harsh and busy, very different than the two-way stand-mounted Harbeth C7's that usually occupy this space. Following my new resolution to be patient, I kept playing recordings without sitting in the sweet spot or taking notes. I did not fool around yet with placement or toe-in, and I left the handsome substantial grilles in place. My idea was to let the ML1s warm up to me and not the other way around.

Some days later, I was sitting in the dining room side of our double parlor, away from the hi-fi. I had cued up a new recording posted on Qobuz, Duruflé's oft-recorded *Requiem* with the Choir of Trinity College Cambridge conducted by Stephen Layton, with Harrison Cole on organ (24/96 FLAC, Hyperion/Qobuz). The music started to billow up and around the two rooms, as if I was sitting in the Church of Saint-Eustache in Paris, the recording venue. The second largest church in Paris, high-Gothic Saint-Eustache houses one of the largest organs in France. It sure sounded like it! This was a huge, magical presentation of a piece that I've heard a lot—who hasn't? It was a fine thing to experience Duruflé's big hit in a fresh, powerful way. The production team (producer Adrian Peacock and engineer David Hinnit) did a fantastic job of capturing a gigantic space. The choir shot up to the stars—and that organ! The McIntosh ML1 Mk II can do pedal points with the best of them.

An audiophile component should be a truth teller; everyone knows the saying "garbage in, garbage out."

I like to order a newly released album as a treat when I listen to new

gear. Here I was with the ML1 Mk IIs sounding really good, ready to rock with a freshly opened, fancy-colored, 2.5-sided LP, *Little Feat - Alive in America '73* (Renaissance Records RDEG-LP-740). The pressing was fine; the recording was not. The sound on this live Denver date is thin and metallic; nothing is balanced with anything else. I sat regretting my purchase and wondering whether the ML1s might share the blame; certainly they weren't forgiving. I made a quick test, pulling up on Qobuz the fabulous-sounding recent remastering of *Waiting for Columbus* (Warner Bros. 2BS 3140. 1978).

Now *that's* how to do a live recording! The Little Feat I know and love could deliver a two-punch knockout; great sound and great swamp roots rock. Those 12" woofers got deep into the backbeat: "All the boys there, at the bar, began to sing along."

Kicking it up a notch

I moved the McIntosh ML1 Mk IIs upstairs and dropped them into the Upstairs System, which is my reference system. The most significant change, other than the generally higher quality of the components, was an increase in available power from 100Wpc to 450Wpc, the latter quantity emerging from my McIntosh MC462 solid state stereo amplifier. Upstairs, I run all separates, including the excellent McIntosh C12000 preamplifier and VPI HW-40 turntable. I positioned the ML1s in the spots usually occupied by my Wilson Sasha Vs, slightly toed in. I connected the speakers to the 8 ohm taps, ready for some serious listening.

But first, I took off the grilles. I am not opposed to grilles on principle, as some audiophiles seem to be. In fact, grilles are in place on three of my four systems. Here, though, it was no contest. The ML1 Mk IIs sound better with the grilles off: more detail and soundstage information; more precise attacks; more, and more distinct, instrumental timbres. The grilles look great and provide real protection, so this is a lifestyle choice.

Reaching for something I knew should sound good, I spun Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab's outstanding 2017 LP pressing of Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello's wonderful 1998 album, *Painted from Memory* (Mercury/Universal MFSL 1-475. 2017).

As heard from the McIntosh ML1 Mk IIs, Elvis's vocals were powerful and heartbreaking, with precise diction and texture in every syllable; the same was true of the background vocals. Many of the songs share the common subject, love that is ending or over, songs like "This House Is Empty Now" and "The Sweetest Punch." In some of these songs, it's time to move on, as in "Such Unlikely Lovers." I particularly adore one Elvis lyric in that song: "I'm not saying that there will be violins. / But don't be surprised if they appear"—then Bacharach hits the orchestration hard with exactly that: violins.

With the ML1s, the rhythm section sounded like it was carved out of marble; what could be tighter? In one of my recent scores, I wrote a direction to the drummer: "Jim Keltner solid," and the drummer knew exactly what I wanted.[4] Keltner plays on this album; the sound of his drums locks down the pocket for the whole album. Icing on the cake is Johnny Mandel's string orchestration in the title song.

I listen to a lot of acoustic small-combo jazz recordings. Which state-of-the-art recording would provide an opportunity for the ML1s to sound their best? I tried a couple before it hit me: The Bill Charlap Trio's *Street of Dreams* (Blue Note B0033904-01), from 2021. Featuring Bill's longtime trio with bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington, this is a definitive piano trio album. There are other great piano recordings on my shelf, but I can't think of a better one right now.

The sound of the Steinway B recorded in Studio C at Sear Sound in New York, by the great engineer James Farber, is as good as it gets. No matter how hard Bill hits the low notes or how delicately he caresses the very high ones, it's all there. (I have recently been recording in that same studio, with the same engineer and the same piano, so I know what it should sound like.) Peter Washington's bass also sounds fantastic, creating a rich foundation for Charlap to sit on, also singing when his lines go up high. Kenny Washington's drums never protrude here—they never do live, either; he's that kind of drummer—but they are always there, at the right place at the right time.

All the details I admire about this recording came through in Technicolor with the ML1s; this was great music recreation. A gorgeous ballad like Frank Loesser's "I'll Know," which closes the A-side of the LP, caused my wife to walk in and ask me who was playing. I have had the pleasure of sitting right next to Bill's piano as this trio performed at the Village Vanguard, and this album, now heard with the ML1 Mk IIs, puts me back there, with the greatest living American Songbook pianist.

There was one more test I needed to make, like Oppenheimer. For many years, I have thought that the best-sounding live recording of a rock group is the series of dates The Grateful Dead recorded one week in February 1969, at Bill Graham's Fillmore West auditorium in San Francisco. I have chosen this as a Record to Live and Let Die for, and

4 Keltner has been on drums for many of Bob Dylan's albums, and he's the regular drummer for Ry Cooder. He's perhaps best known, however, for drumming with three former Beatles, including drummer Ringo Starr. The best description of his drumming style I've seen comes—oddly—from the brief bio accompanying his induction to the Boy Scout Alumni Hall of Fame: It "melds deceptively simple drumming patterns and a loose, casual feel with extraordinary precision, as heard on songs including 'Jealous Guy' by John Lennon, 'Dream Weaver' by Gary Wright, and 'Josie' by Steely Dan."—**Jim Austin**

some of these tapes, along with others from the Avalon Ballroom, became the classic album *Live/Dead*. The Dead had leased the newly developed "Prototype #2," 16-track, 2" tape machine from the Ampex corporation; they were the first rock group to record live with the new format. The Dead's house sound and recording team, Bob Matthews and Betty Cantor, knew their stuff and got a great result. Remastered and cut to vinyl in 2019, the current LP release also benefits from the Plangent Processes tape restoration technology. I own the 4.5-LP boxed set *Fillmore West, February 28th, 1969* (Grateful Dead Productions. 1 590745. 2019).

In *Searching for the Sound*, his charming memoir, Phil Lesh talks about "dropping his bass bombs" on the crowd. Over the course of their career, The Grateful Dead spent millions on their sound systems. The acid test here sonically has to be what Lesh called their "barn-burner" sequence, "That's It for the Other One." In this set, it fills side four and runs 19 minutes, 54 seconds. After the gentle opening of "Cryptical Envelopment," the two drummers start their patented Celtic groove in 12/8 time and Lesh makes his thundering entrance, kicking off "The Other One."

That entrance is what I focused on. Having been given confidence by McIntosh's promise in the manual that if things got too hot, resetting fuses would kick in, I made the decision to run my reference system louder than I ever have before, to hear what the ML1s were capable of. With my sunglasses on and a glass of Laphroaig in hand for fortification, the countdown began ..... BOOM!!!

What will it be?

When I picked myself up off the floor, it struck me that the McIntosh ML1 Mk II offers a unique, three-prong combination of effs: finesse, firepower, and fun. A pair of these speakers will recreate music in all its variety without blinking, with personality and style to spare.

The ML1 Mk II occupies a unique spot in the McIntosh lineup. If you are looking for a more modern, floorstanding format, consider the sibling McIntosh XR100, one of McIntosh's line-array speakers, or a loudspeaker from some other company. But if you like what I've described here, I recommend the ML1 Mk II for your consideration. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources VPI HW-40 turntable, VPI 12" Fatboy tonearm, Pro-Ject Classic EVO turntable, Lyra Etna λ Lambda cartridge, Ortofon Bronze Cadenza cartridge, Sumiko Amethyst cartridge.
Digital sources MacBook Air running Tidal, Roon, Qobuz. Bricasti M1 Series II DAC, Musical Fidelity M1 CDT transport, Pro-Ject CD Box RS 2 T.
Preamplification McIntosh C12000.
Integrated amplifier McIntosh MA252.
Power amplifier McIntosh MA252.
Loudspeakers Harbeth C7ES-3XD, Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha V.
Cables Digital: AudioQuest Diamond AES, Coffee USB; Interconnects: AudioQuest Fire, Sky; Speaker: AudioQuest Firebird, Robin Hood; AC: AudioQuest Dragon.
Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 7000 power conditioner, Mapleshade equipment rack, Audiodesksysteme Vinyl Cleaner Pro, VPI Periphery Ring Clamp, IsoAcoustics isolation footers, Gingko Audio Cloud Platforms.—**Sasha Matson**

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STREAMING PREAMPLIFIER

A few summers ago, I briefly got it in my head that I could become a wine connoisseur. This was due to a very generous and unexpected gift. A local acquaintance had passed away, and his wife wanted to rid her basement of his small wine collection.

I don't know why I was chosen as the lucky recipient, but after stammering half a dozen thank-yous, I suddenly owned about 150 fine wines. A few carried four-figure price tags.

Reliably telling a Pinot Grigio from a Chardonnay isn't part of my skill set. Grape varieties, terroir, vintages? You might as well ask a toddler to become conversant in quantum mechanics. Still, I was intrigued by the bottles and amused by the ridiculousness of the situation. Me, an oenophile? I supposed I could pretend, and I did.

After opening and drinking, with my wife, a 1988 Château Léoville Barton, I wrote an over-the-top review and emailed it to a wine-loving friend for his amusement. "I beheld Hawthorn berries and beef stock along with a suggestion of blonde tobacco. Other than the obvious green walnut, there was a top note of wet Baja beach at dawn, mixing subtly with minke-whale flatulence and a hint of two-day-old scallop innards. Finally, with subsequent sips, I detected the aroma of the well-worn merkin of a Honduran sex worker. All in all, not a bad wine."

Eat your heart out, Robert Parker!

When the buzz of the Bordeaux wore off, so did my oenophile aspirations. I was already an *audiophile*. I mean, one hobby obsessed with determining "betterness" is all I can handle—especially because subjectivity is not the same as off-the-cuff opinionating. Useful opinions are backed by experience, earnest effort, and some level of real discernment.

Anechoic or spectroscopic measurements may give us a basic idea of how a speaker will sound, or how a wine will taste. But we're only able to judge subjectively—not mainly scientifically—if and why the 1998 Romanée-Conti appeals to us more than the 2001 vintage, or whether, to our ears, the Eversolo DMP-A8 streamer sounds good enough to beat its competitors.

And it so happens that I have some perfectly sober thoughts on that matter.

Men of mystery

Eversolo is a subsidiary of consumer-tech company Zidoo, which is based in Shenzhen, China. The brand landed in North America

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Music streamer, DAC, preamp with 6" LCD touchscreen, onboard parametric EQ, virtual VU meters, dedicated control app, AK4191EQ delta-sigma modulator, AK4499EX D/A converter, and the XMOS XU316 audio processor. Capable of decoding up to stereo DSD512, 32/768 PCM data, which can be accepted by USB, Ethernet, or Wi-Fi. S/PDIF and HDMI ARC inputs support stereo PCM up to 24/192 and DoP64. Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz (±0.25dB). Output level: 4.2V XLR, 2.1V RCA. Dynamic range: 128dB XLR, 125dB RCA. THD+N: 120dB XLR, 119dB RCA, unweighted. Crosstalk: –121dB.
Dimensions 15.3" (388mm) W × 9.8" (248mm) D × 3.5" (90mm) H. Weight: 11lb (5kg).
Serial number of unit reviewed 800A805C890F auditioned, 800A805CC764 measured. Manufactured in China.
Price $1980. Approximate number of US dealers: 35; also available online. Warranty: one year.
Manufacturer
Eversolo, Chentian Stock Building, Floor 13,
Dingjunshan Film Technology Industrial Park,
Baotian First Rd., Xixiang Ave.,
Baoan District, Shenzhen,
China 518000.
Web: eversolo.com.
US distributor:
Forte Distribution Inc.,
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a few years ago, with a bit of a splash. Its Neo S 4K player won an EISA Award, but the buzz around the company turned into a low roar because of its $859 DMP-A6, an excellent DAC/streamer that's about half the size of a shoebox. Last year, the A6 and the upgraded A6 Master Edition ($1299) became ubiquitous belles of the ball, followed in November by the larger and more versatile DMP-A8 DAC/streamer/preamp that is the subject of this review. The A8 costs $1980.

US distributor Lily Luo sent me a one-page history of the company that lifts just a small tip of the veil. This is the first sentence, about Eversolo's founders: "Y and M are two senior software engineers in their 40's." Initials only? I inquired about Y and M's full names. "Their English names are Steven and Mirror," Luo wrote back, coyly. "They are very low-key founders and engineers. To the outside world, they are nonexistent and ghost-like."

International men of mystery! Is that cool? Silly? You decide. Luo estimates that the company employs about 100 people, and that "half of the team are software and hardware engineers." She says that Eversolo has its ambitious sights set on "more streaming products, digital processors, power amplification products, and headphone amplifiers."

A clean machine

The A8's CNC-machined aluminum body is just over 15" wide, about 4.5" more imposing than its A6 predecessor. The unit is 9.5" deep, 3.5" tall, and has a 6" diagonal touchscreen—substantially smaller than the 13" screen on the HiFi Rose RS520 I reviewed last year.[1]

On the right of the fascia is the knob fronting a stepped R2R volume control. Expect satisfying clicks from the analog relays as you adjust the level in your choice of 0.5dB or 1dB increments. The knob is surrounded by a dimmable white LED ring. On the far left is a small Eversolo logo—and that's it. "Such a clean machine," Queen's Roger Taylor might sing.

Around back, we have three stubby Bluetooth and Wi-Fi antennae that can fold out of sight without compromising data reception

1 See stereophile.com/content/hifi-rose-rs520-streaming-integrated-amplifier.

MEASUREMENTS

I measured a different sample of the Eversolo DMP-A8 from that auditioned by RvB. The serial number was 800A805CC764, and my sample was fitted with the v1.2.80 firmware.

Looking first at the line-input performance with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system,[1] the DMP-A8 preserved absolute polarity (ie, was noninverting) with both balanced and unbalanced inputs and outputs. With the volume control set to "0dB," the gain was –0.06dB from the balanced inputs to balanced outputs and from the unbalanced inputs to the unbalanced outputs. Setting the volume control to the maximum of "+10.0dB" increased the gain by 9.9dB. The control operated in accurate 0.5dB steps.

The Eversolo's unbalanced input impedance was a relatively low 5k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz and 3.5k ohms at 20kHz. The balanced input impedance was higher, at 18k ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz. The output impedance was usefully low across the audioband, at 101 ohms, balanced, and 51 ohms, unbalanced. The line preamplifier's frequency response was flat from 10Hz to 50kHz and down by just 2.1dB at 200kHz into both 100k ohms (fig.1, blue and red

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

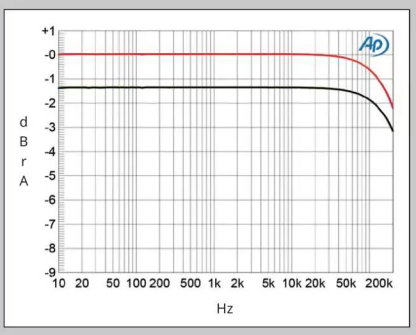

Fig.1 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced input/output, frequency response with volume control set to "0dB" at 1V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray) (1dB/vertical div.).

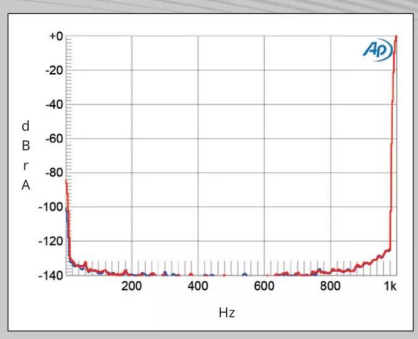

Fig.2 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced input/output, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 3V into 100k ohms with volume control set to "+10dB" (left channel blue, right red) (linear frequency scale).

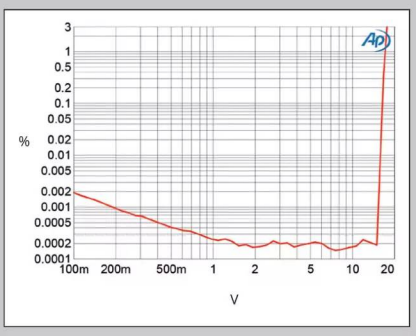

Fig.3 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced output, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 100k ohms.

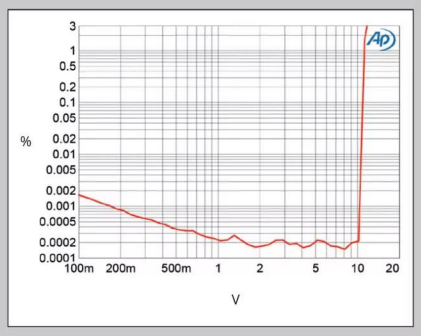

Fig.4 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced output, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz output voltage into 600 ohms.

(at least in my room). Then there are RCA and XLR analog outs, an I²S bus to feed a high-end DAC (should you wish to use the A8 as a standalone streamer) as well as outputs for TosLink and coax digital and two USB ports (marked "3.0 OTG" and "USB AUDIO OUT" respectively).

Eversolo bills the A8 not just as a streamer and DAC but as a high-quality analog preamp. Consequently, you'll find tons of options to connect other gear. The analog ins have both RCA and XLR ports. On the digital side, there's an HDMI ARC input, two TosLink inputs, two S/PDIFs on RCA, and a USB port.

On the left as you face the rear of the unit are a power switch and the usual three-prong power cable receptacle. A standard black power cord is included; I used a Clarus Crimson cable instead. Rounding out the back panel are a gigabit Ethernet port and a 12V

measurements, continued

traces) and 600 ohms (green, gray traces). This graph was taken from the balanced outputs and with the volume control set to "0dB"; the very close channel matching was retained at higher and lower settings of the control and from the unbalanced outputs.

The DMP-A8's channel separation (not shown) was superb, at >140dB in both directions below 3kHz and a still superb 128dB at the top of the audioband. The Eversolo offered extremely low noise from all its outputs, with no power-supply–related spuriae present even with the volume control set to the maximum (fig.2). The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, measured at the balanced outputs with the unbalanced input shorted to ground and the volume control set to "+10.0dB," was a superb 90.9dB ref. the specified maximum output of 4V. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased these ratios by 14dB, while switching an A-weighting filter into circuit further improved the ratios to 107.5dB.

Fig.3 plots the percentage of THD+noise in the Eversolo's balanced output against the output voltage into 100k ohms. Actual distortion lies beneath the noisefloor below an output of 2V, and the clipping voltage, which we define as when the THD+N reaches 1%, occurred at 17V in balanced mode, 8.5V in single-ended mode. The balanced output's clipping voltage into the current-hungry 600 ohm load was only slightly lower than that into 100k ohms, at 11.1V (fig.4).

To ensure that the THD+N reading was not dominated by noise, I measured how the DMP-A8's distortion changed with frequency at an output level of 4V. The THD+N percentage into 100k ohms was superbly low throughout the audioband into both 100k ohms (fig.5, blue and red traces) and 600 ohms (green, gray traces). The second harmonic was the highest in level (fig.6),

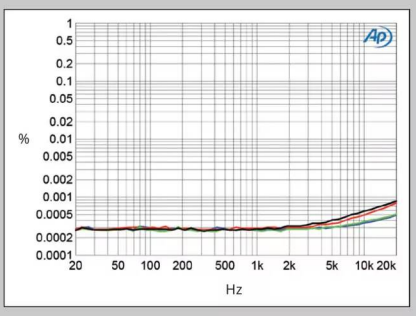

Fig.5 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced output, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 4V into: 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red), 600 ohms (left green, right gray).

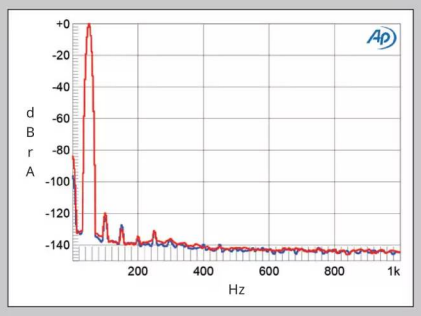

Fig.6 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced output, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 4V into 600 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

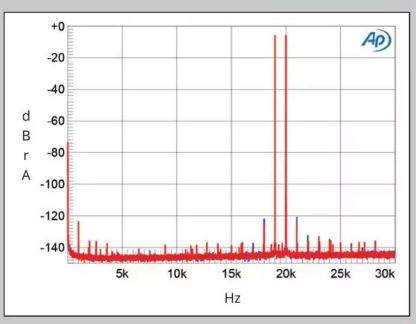

Fig.7 Eversolo DMP-A8, balanced output, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 4V into 600 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

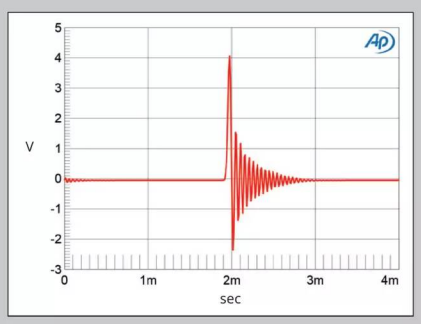

Fig.8 Eversolo DMP-A8, Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

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trigger.

You can run cables between each output and whatever associated equipment you're using, but only one output at a time can be enabled—and they *do* need to be enabled. During my first evening with the A8, it took me an embarrassingly long time to understand why I wasn't hearing anything. I checked that I was using the correct input on the preamp, that the AudioQuest Coffee digital cable was working as it should, that I'd selected and enabled the player in the Roon app, and that the volume was up to a potentially audible level. The upshot: Don't be like me. Both the A8 touchscreen and the phone app feature an input/output screen. Just tap on the inputs and outputs you want to turn on.

When a desire for convenience is more important than getting the highest audio quality (it happens; I'm not sniffing!), users can connect to the A8 via Bluetooth, including aptX HD. The codec is a solid improvement over regular aptX, though still not lossless, and it only works with a similarly enabled source device. (Your iPhone, for example, will connect with the AAC codec, which is also supported.)

Flipping the unit over reveals a slot for an NVMe M.2 solid state drive (not included), where you can store your music files locally and call them up with the Eversolo app or the front-panel interface.

measurements, continued

but at just –120dB (0.0001%), even at 4V into 600 ohms, was negligible. Intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at the same peak voltage level into 600 ohms was similarly vanishingly low in level (fig.7).

I examined the behavior of the Eversolo's D/A conversion circuitry with one of the optical inputs. This locked to S/PDIF data with sample rates up to 192kHz. With the volume control set to "0dB," a 1kHz digital signal at 0dBFS resulted in an output level of 4.36V from the balanced outputs, 2.18V from the single-ended outputs. The DMP-A8's digital inputs preserved absolute polarity from both output types with the XLR jacks set to Positive Port Polarity. (The polarity setting is fixed as positive for the analog inputs.)

The DMP-A8's AKM DAC offers a choice of six reconstruction filters: Sharp Rolloff; Slow Rolloff; Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff; Short Delay, Slow Rolloff; Super Slow; and Low Dispersion, Short Delay. Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff is the default filter; its impulse response with 44.1kHz data (fig.8) indicates that this filter is a fairly long minimum-phase type, with all the ringing following the single sample at 0dBFS. The Short Delay, Slow Rolloff filter is also a minimum-phase type but is very short (fig.9), while the Sharp Rolloff filter

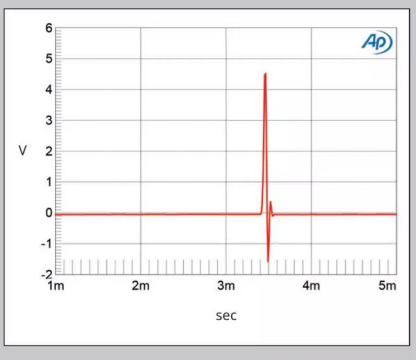

Fig.9 Eversolo DMP-A8, Short Delay, Slow Rolloff filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

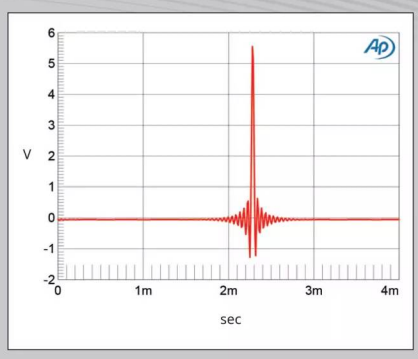

Fig.10 Eversolo DMP-A8, Sharp Rolloff filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

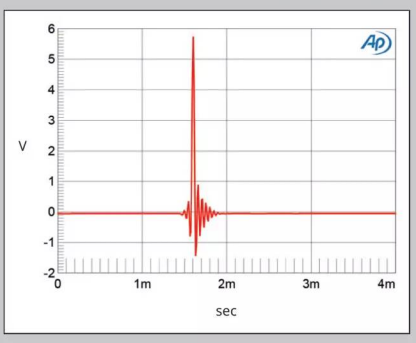

Fig.11 Eversolo DMP-A8, Low Dispersion, Short Delay filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

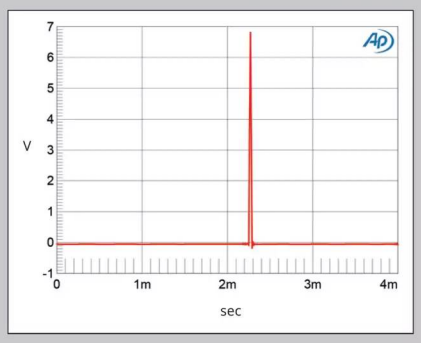

Fig.12 Eversolo DMP-A8, Super Slow filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

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The A8 will accept up to 4TB of SSD of storage via said slot. Need more? You can add a USB drive via that USB OTG port.

Photos of the unit's exceptionally well-organized innards reveal two power supplies, one linear, one switching. Eversolo says this approach eliminates "interference and noise between the system circuit and the audio circuit." The linear PSU circuit consists of a multiwinding toroidal transformer "designed to match the characteristics of analog audio circuits." The switching power supply, meanwhile, is tailored for the system circuit, where it aims to reduce "ripple and magnetic leakage interference," theoretically resulting in increased purity of sound. The A8 autosenses the voltage coming from the wall and adapts accordingly: You can use it in the US or overseas without flicking a manual switch.

Look closely and you'll see high-quality WIMA capacitors from Germany and Nichikon ones from Japan alongside Japanese Omron relays and US-made, audio-specific Texas Instruments OPA1612 op-amps.

The A8 handles files up to DSD512 and 32/768 PCM when connected via network or USB, and outputs digital files in the same elevated quality over I²S or USB. Eversolo says that the unit has a signal/noise ratio and a dynamic range of 128dB and THD+N of −120dB. Let's see if JA confirms.

Notable extra features include CD playback and ripping from an external optical drive, half a dozen digital filters to subtly tailor the A8's sonics to taste, and a nice selection of eye candy in the form of selectable virtual VU meters and spectrometers.

Screen graphics and more

The A8's touchscreen is tastefully designed, not garish. It does look a little less contrasty than the swish, enormous screen on the HiFi Rose RS520. On the A8 home screen, a row of five colored digital tiles fills most of the area. They are, from left to right: Music (where you can create a library); Streaming (including Tidal, Qobuz, HighResAudio, Amazon Music, Apple Music, Deezer, and—unusu-

measurements, continued

is a conventional linear-phase type, with time-symmetrical ringing on either side of the single full-scale sample (fig.10). The Slow Rolloff filter (not shown) is also linear-phase but very short, while the Low Dispersion, Short Delay filter's impulse response (fig.11) is very similar to the hybrid type offered by the ESS DACs.[2] The odd man out is the Super Slow filter, as its impulse response (fig.12) suggests that it is not a filter at all. (This was confirmed by the oscilloscope screen, which showed with a 1kHz tone that the DMP-A8 was simply outputting the individual sample voltages.[3]) The very small amount of linear-phase ringing in this graph is due to the Audio Precision A/D converter's antialiasing filter operating with 200kHz sampling.

With 44.1kHz-sampled white noise and the Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff filter, the DMP-A8's response rolled off sharply above 20kHz (fig.13, red and magenta traces), reaching full stop-band suppression at 24kHz. No aliased images of a full-scale tone at 19.1kHz are visible (blue and cyan traces), and the distortion harmonics are all extremely low in level. The Sharp Rolloff filter behaved identically with this signal, while the Short Delay, Slow Rolloff and Slow Rolloff filters didn't reach full stop-band attenuation with the white noise signal until 37kHz (fig.14, red and magenta traces), with a strong aliased image of the 19.1kHz tone present at 25kHz (blue and cyan traces). The rolloff was faster with the Low Dispersion, Short Delay filter (not shown), and again, the Super Slow filter was the odd man out, as its white-noise spectrum (fig.15) had nulls at integer multiples of the sample rate, between which are mirrored images of the audioband signal.

The Eversolo's frequency response with data sampled at 44.1, 96, and 192kHz dropped off sharply just below half of each sample rate with the Sharp Rolloff, Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff, and Low Dispersion, Short Delay filters (not shown). As expected, the rolloff started earlier with the Slow Rolloff and Short Delay, Slow Rolloff filters (fig.16), and with 44.1kHz data (green, gray traces), the output at 20kHz was down by

2 See, for example, fig.11 at stereophile.com/content/arcam-radia-a25-integrated-amplifier-measurements-page-2.

3 See, for example, fig.2 at stereophile.com/content/holoaudio-may-level-3-da-processor-measurements.

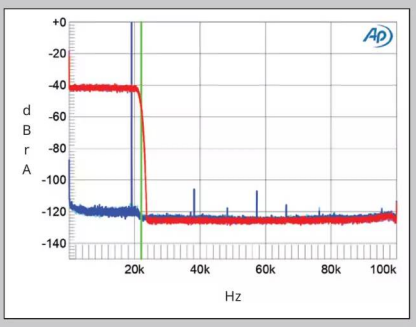

Fig.13 Eversolo DMP-A8, Short Delay, Sharp Rolloff filter, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan), with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

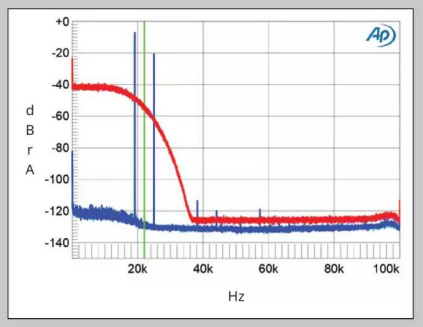

Fig.14 Eversolo DMP-A8, Short Delay, Slow Rolloff filter, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan), with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

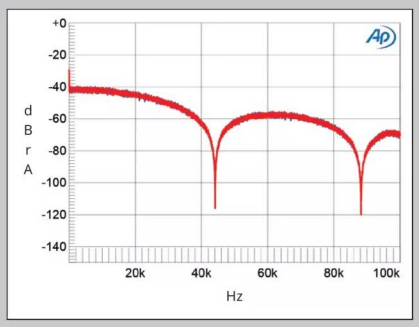

Fig.15 Eversolo DMP-A8, Super Slow filter, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

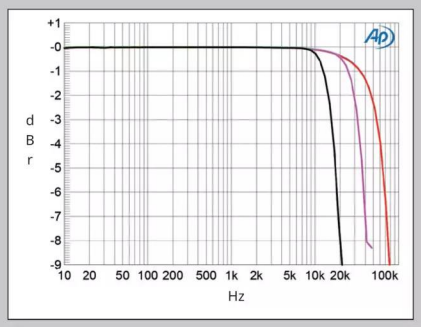

Fig.16 Eversolo DMP-A8, Slow Rolloff filter, frequency response at –12dBFS into 100k ohms with data sampled at: 44.1kHz (left channel green, right gray), 96kHz (left cyan, right magenta), and 192kHz (left blue, right red) (1dB/vertical div.).

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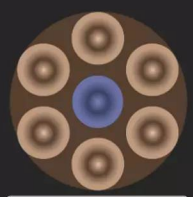
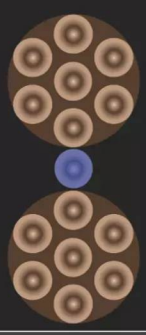


7-TWEETER ARRAY



15-TWEETER ARRAY

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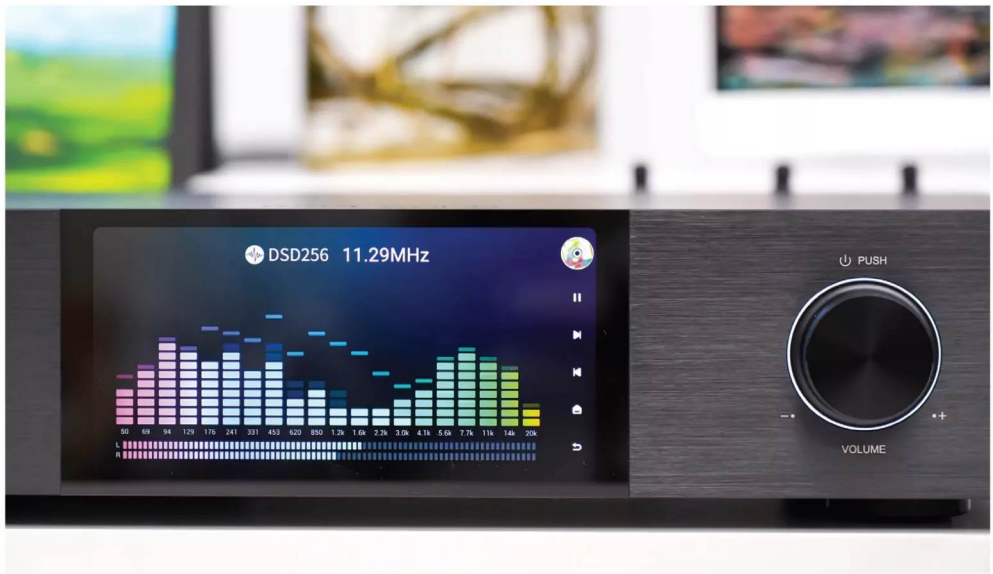
ally—Soundcloud); Files (where things like Alarms and Audiobooks are stored), Source, and Settings.

Firing up the unit for the first time produces an animated Eversolo logo on the screen; about 25 seconds later, you're able to begin customizing, starting with setting language, time zone, choosing your network, and entering your Wi-Fi password. The next screen says "Phone Control" and shows you scannable QR codes to download and set up the app.

Signing into Qobuz, Amazon Music, and Tidal produced no drama. For each of the music services, there's a mostly hidden virtual drawer on the left of the A8 display. Tap on it, and



measurements, continued

8dB at 20kHz. Channel separation (not shown) ranged from >130dB at low frequencies to a still-excellent 97dB at the top of the audioband.

Fig.17 shows the spectrum of the Eversolo's output while it decoded dithered data representing a 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 16-bit and 24-bit data. The increase in bit depth lowers the noisefloor level by 30dB, which suggest that the DMP-A8's DAC offers a superb 21 bits of resolution. With undithered 16-bit data representing a tone at exactly –90.31dBFS, the three DC voltage levels described by the data were cleanly reproduced (not shown), and with undithered 24-bit data, the Eversolo output a clean sinewave, despite the very low signal level (also not shown).

As suggested by fig.13, the third was the dominant distortion harmonic, but it lay at a negligible –117dB (0.00014%). Intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones sampled at 44.1kHz and the Sharp Rolloff filter was very low (fig.18), but aliasing products at 24.1kHz and 25.1kHz were present with the two Slow Rolloff filters and the Low Dispersion, Short Delay filter (fig.19). With the Super Slow setting, the two high-frequency tones gave rise to a complicated mess of aliasing products in the audioband, even if I reduced the signal level by 6dB.

The DMP-A8 offered superb rejection of word-clock jitter. Fig.20 was taken with 16-bit optical J-Test data. All the odd-order harmonics of the LSB-level, low-frequency squarewave lay at the correct levels, shown by the sloping green line, there are no supply-related sidebands present, and there is no broadening of the spectral spike at one-quarter the sample rate.

Despite its affordable price, the Eversolo DMP-A8's measured performance is state-of-the-art in both analog and digital domains.—**John Atkinson**

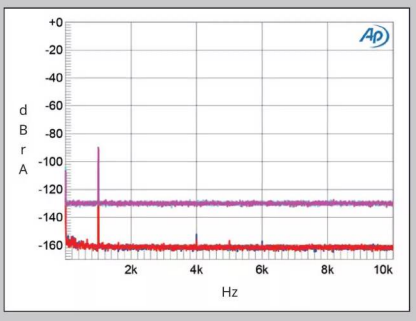


Fig.17 Eversolo DMP-A8, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 16-bit data (left channel cyan, right magenta) and 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

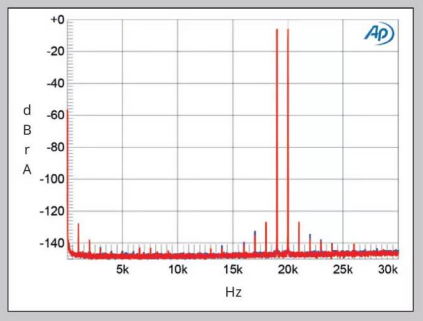


Fig.18 Eversolo DMP-A8, Sharp Rolloff filter, 24-bit data, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak, sampled at 44.1kHz.

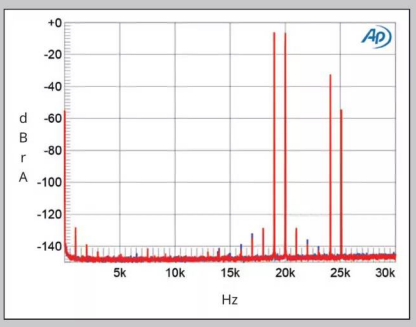


Fig.19 Eversolo DMP-A8, Low Dispersion, Short Delay filter, 24-bit data, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak, sampled at 44.1kHz.

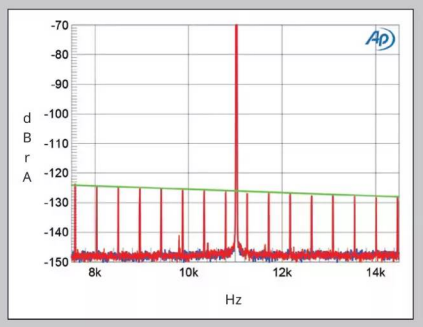


Fig.20 Eversolo DMP-A8, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz: 16-bit TosLink data (left channel blue, right red). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

you get options to access your favorite genres and playlists and to discover new music curated by the streaming service in question. The A8's screen is not quite as responsive as the average new smartphone's, but the lag is very slight and no cause for complaint.

Most people will interact with the unit via the Eversolo app or via Roon. (The A8 is a Roon endpoint, though as I write this in mid-April, official Roon certification is still pending.) Everything functioned flawlessly in the three months I spent with it. From the $99 WiiM Mini to the $15,000 Aurender A20, I don't think I've ever had a player that was this quick and painless to set up and master.

I also like that the made-in-China Eversolo arrived well-adapted to its new home in America. When I poked around the HiFi Rose RS520 and got a few screens deep, I saw some Hangul (Korean) characters as well as odd quasi-English phrases betraying that the system had been designed in a non–English-speaking country. The Eversolo interface is free of such quirks.

On the other hand, as I mentioned, the A8 screen is a large step down from the Rose's in size, which affects some usability aspects. You'd have to sit close to the A8—or be seriously eagle eyed—to read most of the information on its screen. Especially when Roon Radio starts playing recordings it thinks I'll like, I appreciate being able to glance up and see the name of the song and the artist. The Rose is terrific that way, even sumptuous, its info easily legible from 12' away; the Eversolo ... nah. But if you typically listen to music while using Roon on your tablet or laptop, or you control your player via the app, this point becomes almost moot, as you'll always have artist and song info literally at your fingertips. I didn't use the plastic Bluetooth remote that Eversolo ships with the A8. App control rocks.

Now listen here

In 2024, discerning the sonic differences among well-designed digital components is not a straightforward affair. For me, DACs and streamers now tend to be as close in sonic quality as varieties of mineral water: they're substantially alike, and personal taste plays an outsized role. Just as it's unlikely that being served a non-favored bottle of water will spoil your meal, it's conceivable but improbable that a carefully built digital source will make or break your listening experience.

That said, I'll gladly describe what I heard from the Eversolo DMP-A8. The news is overwhelmingly good. Through my Focal Utopia Scala Evo reference speakers powered by a Krell FPB200c amplifier or an Anthem STR integrated, instruments popped in 3D fashion and voices had great presence, solidity, and timbre. Harmonic textures were rich but not especially warm. We'll get to that.

I started with Emmylou Harris's *Wrecking Ball* (24/44.1 FLAC, Nonesuch/Qobuz). Thanks to producer Daniel Lanois, it's one of the most gorgeous-sounding 1990s albums I know, but it will test your equipment. The treble can sound splashy, and there's a hint of sibilance on some of Harris's vocals. On the A8, straight out of the box, the region above 6kHz or 7kHz sounded a smidge hot at first, but the unit settled into crisp and controlled within minutes.

Fans of Leo Kottke and Ry Cooder should consider giving Bob Brozman's *Blues Reflex* (16/44.1 FLAC, RUF/Qobuz) a listen. On "Vieux Kanyar Blues," the master guitarist's high, trilling notes, reminiscent of the Indian music he embraced, were lifelike to the point of near exhilaration. The instruments poked out into the listening space rather than just hanging between the speakers.

Spatial information was always excellent, across hundreds of tracks. On one of my playlists, trombonist Bruce Fowler's solemn collaboration with Suzette Moriarty, "Duet for French Horn and Trombone" (16/44.1 FLAC, Fossil/Tidal FLAC), was followed by trumpeter Art Farmer playing "Sometime Ago" (16/44.1 FLAC, Rhino Atlantic/Qobuz). Farmer's instrument is close-miked and on the dry side, probably recorded in a small, nonreflective room or a sound booth. In contrast, on the Fowler track, the horns are awash in natural room reverb. The recording approach couldn't be more different, but the A8 presented both to great advantage. (Listening to the ethereal reverb tails on the Fowler recording is one of those audiophile pleasures the uninitiated would probably scoff at, but I'll take my joy where I can find it.)

On "Beat Box," from *Into Battle with the Art of Noise* (16/44.1 FLAC, ZTT/Qobuz), which I hadn't listened to in a couple of decades, a woman's voice says "Yes? Oh no I don't believe it," and it honestly gave me a startle; it really did seem as if someone was talking at the far end of my room.

Later, I played Philip Glass's "North Star," performed by Slagwerk Den Haag (16/44.1 FLAC, Orange Mountain Music/Qobuz). About two minutes in, one of the group's percussionists hammers on a toy piano. It's a sharp, aggressive sound (intended to be so, I think). In a direct comparison, the A8 rendered it with just a touch more bite than the Aurender A20 or the HiFi Rose RS520. On the whole, the A8 sounds a sliver brighter than what I'd consider strictly neutral—or anyway, than what I'm used to. On some recordings, the Eversolo can emphasize the metal jingles of a tambourine while obscuring the sound of the player's palm on the instrument's wood or plastic shell.

On Big Star's "Thirteen," from the band's first album, *#1 Record* (16/44.1 FLAC, Stax/Qobuz), during the acoustic guitar solo that starts at 1:29, the triads played on the G, B, and high E strings aren't sharp sounding or strident per se, but neither would I call them fluid or relaxed. Have I heard better? The Aurender A20 sounds half a click mellower and less forward—more "analog" if you will. But I only picked this up during direct A/B listening, and I had to repeat it to make sure it wasn't my imagination. Considering the $13,000 price difference between the Eversolo and Aurender, pointing fingers at the former would make me feel a bit dopey. And anyway, the player's onboard digital filters and EQ let users customize the sound. It's hard to overstate the level of versatility this provides. You can even apply your own FIR filter coefficients,[2] which you can create in REW or similar software.

During many a critical-listening session, I'll cue up the late Lhasa de Sela's "My Name," off *The Living Road* (16/44.1 FLAC, Audiogram/Qobuz). The recording starts with a brutally deep bass drum and a delicate two-tone chime—beast and beauty. It sounded convincing, even riveting, through the A8. The same was true for the reverb-heavy bass drum and the massed finger snaps on Lorde's "Royals," from *Pure Heroine* (16/44.1 FLAC, Universal/Qobuz).

Another great test track is the Chico Hamilton Quintet's "Passin' Thru," from the album of the same name (16/44.1 FLAC, Impulse!/Qobuz). Listening to it is its own pleasure, but I'll often focus on the ride cymbal. Hamilton plays it with a brush. On lesser gear, the brushed cymbal taps don't really register as separate time events; they become a mess of white noise. The A8 had no such problems.

When a sixth cup of coffee seems unwise, but I need a dose of energy, Korean rapper Beenzino delivers. His 2015 single "Break" (16/44.1 FLAC, Genie/Qobuz) is raw, wild, and raucous in the best life-affirming way. The A8 reproduced the track enthusiastically, proving that it can go beyond prim and subtle into full party-animal mode.

Wrap It. Wrap It Good.

When Jim Austin reviewed the Magico A5, he concluded, "These could be my musical companions for a long, happy life." That's a plaudit that, simple as it is, I don't think I'd ever deeply considered.

Like most reviewers, I've praised audio gear I genuinely loved and sincerely recommended, but that I wouldn't necessarily pick to live with. There are lots of possible reasons for that. I don't have enough floor or shelf space, I'm not crazy about the look, it's not the right synergy for my listening room and system, it's out of my budget, it's functionally and sonically similar to something I already own, and so on.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources Eversolo A6 Master Edition. Aurender A20 streamer and DAC controlled with Conductor 4 iOS app. HiFi Rose RS520. 16" MacBook Pro M1 Max running Roon 2.0. Roon ROCK running on a Lenovo ThinkCentre.
Preamplifiers Benchmark HPA4, BAT VK-90.
Power amplifier Krell FPB 200c (recapped).
Integrated amplifiers Anthem STR, PrimaLuna EVO 400.
Loudspeakers Focal Utopia Scala Evo, Tekton Moab Be, Piega 811.
Cables Speaker: AudioQuest Thunderbird Zero. Power: AudioQuest, RSX, Clarus. Interconnect: AudioQuest, Clarus.
Accessories Townshend Seismic Podiums. AudioQuest PowerQuest PQ-707 power conditioner. Puritan PSM156 mains purifier. Puron plug-in AC enhancers. Nordost QKoil, QSine, and QWave power filters.
Listening room Custom 21' × 15' space with 10'-tall walls and a 16' cathedral ceiling. Hardwood floor over gravel and concrete. Four bass traps, two skyline diffusers, and various absorption panels.—**Rogier van Bakel**

The Eversolo DMP-A8 is an easy-to-love, highly intuitive piece that, for me, waves away all those possible objections. A little music-making powerhouse of exceptional versatility, it laughs at vaguely pejorative terms like *chi-fi*, confidently taking a top position in the sub-$5000 streamer/DAC category. ■

2 See tinyurl.com/3mwd5kme.

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KEN MICALLEF

Triode Lab 2A3 EVO

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

For 16 years, I bled jazz. Countless hours alone in my practice shed, honing technique, recording myself for brutal self-analysis, dissecting and transcribing master drummers' solos note for note. My dream was to transcend technique, to exist in a state of pure reaction among musicians in perfect communion, where improvisation flows as effortlessly as thought.

The years melted away—George Lawrence Stone's sticking variations, Benjamin Podemski's concert drum solos, dog-eared "Real Book" charts, college big band concerts, smoky jam sessions, a basement practice routine that nearly deafened Mom. Once I was in NYC, there were classes at Drummer's Collective.

A refreshing clarity brought instruments closer, revealing those subtle nuances superior musicians express.

With intense application, playing became rote. But in rare moments of surrender, it wasn't me playing the music anymore. The music played *me*—ideas transmitted effortlessly, without thought, guided by some unseen force: maybe the woman in the third row, maybe the ghost of Tony Williams. In such moments, when fatigue stilled the mind, instrument and music intertwined, a single entity responding not to conscious thought but to some unknown, unknowable force. What ensued was beyond my mental reach.

In the 1980s, my musician crew and I stumbled upon this "flow" state, which we coined as part of our musicians' parlance. Or so we thought. Turns out that Hungarian-American psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi was already onto it. "Flow in positive psychology, also known colloquially as being 'in the zone,'" states Wikipedia, is "the

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Tube-rectified single-ended triode integrated amplifier capable of outputting 3.5Wpc into 8 ohms (5.4dBW). Tube complement: Input/preamp, one pair each: Sophia Electric 12AX7, Northern Electric 6SN7; rectifier: Sophia Electric Aqua 274; power, one pair each Electro-Harmonix 2A3 EH or KR Audio 2A3. Maximum gain: 21.7dB. Input sensitivity: 350mV for max power. Total harmonic distortion: 1% at rated power. Bandwidth at rated power: 20Hz–20kHz. Frequency range (at 1W): 20Hz–2kHz. Input impedance: 220k ohms. Output impedance: Not specified.
Finishes British Racing Green Metallic, Copper Metallic, Dark Mocha Brown Metallic, Orange, Polestar Green/Blue, Hammertone Silver-Gray, Maroon Red/Ferragamo Red, Satin Black, Dark Gray Hammertone, Classic Dark Gray Gloss.
Dimensions 13.5" (343mm) W × 17.5" (444.5mm) D × 10" (254mm) H, including tubes. Weight: 30lb (13.6kg).
Serial number of unit reviewed 2A3EVO23041. Manufactured in Canada.
Price $8999. Number of US dealers: 8. Warranty: 3 years parts and labor (excluding tubes).
Manufacturer
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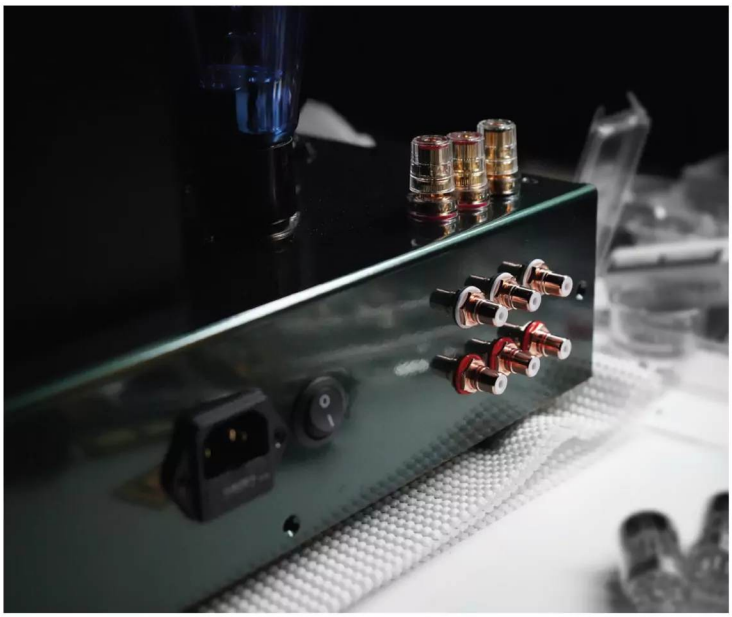
mental state in which a person performing some activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity."

Flow, or something like it, happens for listeners, too. I've experienced it often in the audience at jazz performances. As a *Stereophile* reviewer, I've chased that elusive feeling. Occasionally, a new piece of equipment—single-ended triode (SET) integrated amplifiers by Audio Note (UK) and Italy's Mastersound; push-pull stereo tube amps from E.A.T. and Shindo; solid state amps from Ayre and Luxman; a digital amp from Technics—have unlocked a similar sonic transcendence. I've heard the flow state from inexpensive gear and from ultra-expensive gear. It's a bit of a phantom, but when it's there, it's undeniable. The flow state can be physical and cerebral: felt, heard, and conceptualized.

Some believe that SETs are especially adept at achieving the flow state, thanks to their rare ability to reproduce music in its most emotionally engaging form, to produce a harmonic aura, an immersive bloom, a rich physical presence that fills the room. Paired with the right high-efficiency speakers, well-designed SET amps can even deliver solid, tuneful bass.



SET amplifiers, which operate in class-A, typically produce watts in single digits, powering speakers with a single, low-power output device. Push-pull amps, which run in either class-A or class-AB, split the incoming AC signal into halves then reassemble the signal at the output. Push-pull tube amps can sound wonderful (as my Shindo Haut Brion does), be more affordable, and offer more power, but they're not SETs.

Hailing from Triode Lab's Canadian factory, the SET 2A3 EVO integrated amplifier ($8999) is built from such high-quality components as Mundorf silver oil film coupling capacitors, Japanese QQQ tube sockets, and Hashimoto Electric output transformers (originally found in the coveted '60s-era Sansui AU-111 integrated). The 2A3 EVO is an autobias design employing one pair each of 12AX7 and 6SN7 tubes in the preamp stage, a 274B rectifier tube, and two direct-heated 2A3 tubes for power. It outputs 3.5Wpc into 8 ohms. It stands 13½" wide × 17½" deep × 10" high including tubes and weighs 30lb.

Triode Lab was founded in 2004. Personnel include Founder and Designer Frank Ng, Marketing and Retail Partner Peter Wolter,

MEASUREMENTS

After carefully installing the Triode Lab 2A3 EVO's tubes, I performed a complete set of tests of the amplifier with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system[1] using the Electro-Harmonix 2A3 Gold output tubes, then repeated the testing with the KR 2A3 tubes that KM told me he preferred. As usual, I waited for an hour after powering up the amplifier before starting the testing.

The 2A3 EVO inverted polarity from both the 4 ohm and 8 ohm output transformer taps. The input impedance was a usefully high 61k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, 41k ohms at 20kHz. The source impedance from the 8 ohm output transformer taps with the KR tubes was relatively low, at 1 ohm from 20Hz to 20kHz. From the 4 ohm taps, the source impedance was 0.66 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, rising slightly to 0.72 ohms at 20kHz. The source impedance with the Electro-Harmonix tubes was slightly lower, at 0.85 ohms across the audioband from the 8 ohm taps, 0.6 ohms from the 4 ohm taps.

With the KR tubes and the volume control set to its maximum, the left channel's voltage gain into 8 ohms was a low 23.4dB from the 8 ohm tap and 20.8dB from the 4 ohm tap. The maximum gain with the Electro-Harmonix tubes was slightly higher, at 24.5dB and 21.0dB, respectively. The right channel's gain was around 0.8dB lower than the left's, which can be seen in fig.1, which plots the Triode Lab's small-signal frequency response from the 8 ohm taps. The response in both channels is flat in the audioband; into 8 ohms (blue trace), it is down by 3dB at 70kHz. No ultrasonic resonant peaks are present. The variation in the frequency response with our standard simulated loudspeaker[2] (gray trace), due to the Ohm's law interaction between the source impedance and that of the load, was relatively low for a tubed amplifier, at ±0.7dB. The response variation with the simulated speaker from the 4 ohm tap was lower, at ±0.4dB. Fig.1 was taken with the Electro-Harmonix tubes and the volume control set to its maximum. The channel imbalance and high-frequency –3dB point were identical with the KR tubes and at lower settings of the volume control. However, with the control set to –12dB, the output below 30Hz rose by up to 2dB.

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

2 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

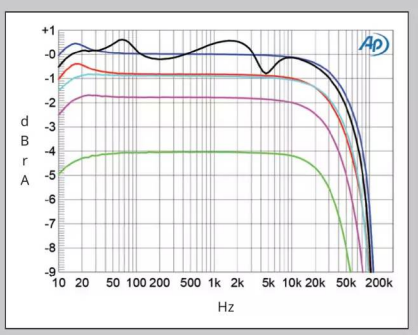


Fig.1 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, Electro-Harmonix output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (right channel, gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (green) (2dB/vertical div.).

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Product Specialist Noam Bronstein, and Speaker Designer Robert Gaboury, who designed the Heretic AD614 loudspeakers that Herb Reichert so loved.[1]

"We are fortunate that at Triode Lab and Finale Audio"—Finale is a joint venture with Triode Lab that manufactures less esoteric designs—"it's a team effort with some highly talented engineers and technicians from different fields of expertise in the electronics industry," wrote Frank Ng in an email.

Triode Lab's SET EVO line boasts four integrated amplifiers built around 45 or 2A3 tubes, alongside three preamps and a battalion of eight power amps.

"Each transformer, each part, each bit, is well thought out and considered," notes the Triode Lab website. "For example, the power transformer is right behind the 2A3s for a reason: It provides the shortest voltage supply path to the 2A3s. If it is longer, the weak 2.5V that feeds them might drop even lower, resulting in lowered output power. Look at the output transformers: The binding posts are put right behind them, again aiming for the shortest path for superior bass response. Every inch under the chassis [is] well used. They all have a reason to be there."

"All of us spend a great amount of time listening, voicing and tuning each of our designs; it's not just lab work," Ng added. "Our motto is, 'the measurements have to be good; the sound, too, is equally important.' Even the rubber footers help us voice the sound we have in mind."

Constructed from Canadian aluminum, the 2A3 EVO amplifier is assembled in a two-part enclosure of 0.080"-thick top and bottom plates. My review sample was finished in handsome British Racing Green Metallic, one of 10 available paint options.

Unlike most amplifiers, the 2A3 MK2 is ordered without tubes. This allows customers to "tube roll"—to experiment with different tubes to subtly alter the sound. Fear not, Triode Lab will supply tubes, at market price, upon request. Options include Canadian, Chinese, and Russian manufacturers and more exotic brands, letting you tailor the sonic signature to your desires. My review

1 See stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-71-heretic-ad614-loudspeaker.

measurements, continued

The Triode Lab's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms was excellent, with a small, critically damped overshoot on the leading edges (fig.2).

The 2A3 EVO's channel separation (not shown) was good, at >70dB in both directions between 400Hz and 5kHz. The separation decreased to 60dB at the top and bottom of the audioband. The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms), taken from the 8 ohm taps with the inputs shorted to ground and the volume control set to its maximum, was 63.3dB in the left channel, 60.1dB in the right. These ratios remained the same when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz–22kHz but increased to 89.4dB, left, and 84.9dB, right, when A-weighted. The ratios from the 4 ohm outputs, with their lower gain, were 3dB better.

Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noisefloor while the Triode Lab integrated's 8 ohm taps drove a 1kHz tone at 1Wpc into 8 ohms and with the volume control set to the maximum (fig.3) revealed relatively high levels of power supply–related spuriae in both channels. Random noise was lower in level in the left channel (blue trace) than the right (red trace). Repeating the analysis with the volume control set to –12dB and the input signal level higher by the same 12dB (green, gray traces) didn't significantly change the levels of supply-related spuriae or random noise.

Triode Lab specifies a maximum output power of "3.5W–5W+ depending on the model and output transformers." Looking at how the left channel's THD+N percent-

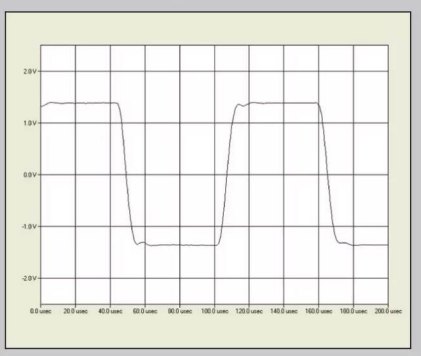

Fig.2 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, Electro-Harmonix output tubes, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

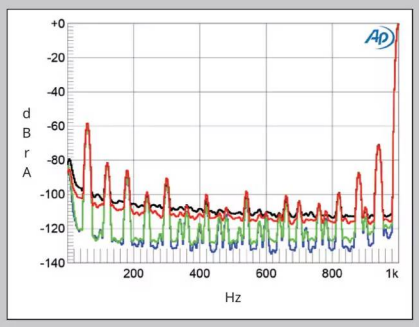

Fig.3 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, Electro-Harmonix output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with volume control set to its maximum (left channel blue, right red) and to –12dB (left green, right gray) (linear frequency scale).

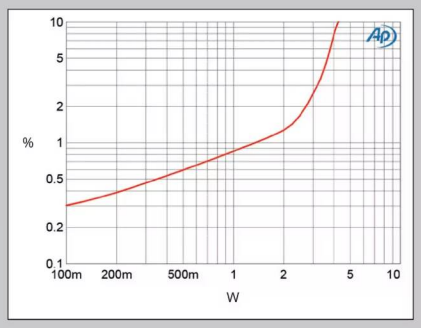

Fig.4 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, KR output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

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sample came with a pair each of Sophia Electric 12AX7s, Northern Electric 6SN7s, Electro-Harmonix 2A3 EHs, KR Audio 2A3s (for comparison), and a single Sophia Electric Aqua 274B rectifier tube. Herb Reichert lent me a pair of NOS RCA 2A3s.

The 2A3 EVO's layout is clean. On top, you'll find the tubes, a black-anodized Swiss-made Elma aluminum input selector, the knob for an ALPS Blue volume control, and a pair of CMC gold-plated binding posts for 4- and 8-ohm taps. Housed in satin black cases are the transformers—two Hashimoto HC-203U output transformers and a Hashimoto 45/2A3 power transformer—and a large choke. The rear panel is home to three pairs of CMC gold-plated RCA inputs, a gold-plated Furutech IEC power receptacle, and the power button.

Triode Lab offers a unique way to personalize output transformers. When ordering through a dealer, the customer can choose between three Hashimoto output transformers—7W Standard, 20W Classic, or 20W Potted Combo—each offering a distinct sonic signature.

"The 20W Classic version comes standard with both the 2A3 EVO and 45 EVO amps," Ng explained. "This transformer is an excellent compromise, as it can drive most speakers very well and has a more reasonable cost. This is in your review sample."

"The 7W is a potted design," Ng continued. "These have superior highs and clarity, speed and sharpness, but are more limited with bass. These make a good match for minimonitors, higher efficiency two-ways, and fast/smaller-sized single drivers."

"The 20W Potted are the ultimate transformers," Ng concluded. "They drive everything well, including bigger horn speakers and hybrids like Tannoy, JBL, Altec, Klipsch, etc., designs. The speakers (and ancillary gear, including tubes and cables) need to be good

enough for the 20W Potted, to be able to demonstrate its ability and justify its significant cost."

My review sample included the upgraded choke option ($250). "The upgrade to the large Hashimoto choke transformer results in lower DC resistance, better magnetic flux saturation, and in turn, lower signal loss in the power supply circuit," Bronstein wrote. "The result is a slightly cleaner and more musical audio signal." An upgrade to "R" status, which includes the 20W Potted transformer, the upgraded choke, and better hardware and capacitors, adds $1500 to the price.

Triode Lab eschews traditional point-to-point wiring in favor of

measurements, continued

age changed with power, the 2A3 EVO fitted with the KR tubes output just 1.5W from the 8 ohm tap into 8 ohms with our usual definition of clipping, which is when the THD+noise reaches 1%. Relaxing that definition to 10% THD+N, the amplifier output 4.3W from the 8 ohm tap into 8 ohms (6.33dBW, fig.4), 3W from the 8 ohm tap driving 4 ohms (1.76dBW, not shown), 4.6W from the 4 ohm tap into 8 ohms (6.63dBW, fig.5), and 4.1W from the 4 ohm tap into 4 ohms (3.12dBW, fig.6). These maximum powers were very similar when I repeated the tests with the Electro-Harmonix tubes but with slightly higher distortion at low powers. The rise in the THD+N percentage as the power increases above 100mW in figs.4–6 suggests that the circuit has little or no loop negative feedback.

I examined how the percentage of THD+N in both channels varied with frequency at 1V (fig.7). The THD+N was lower in the right channel into both 8 ohms (red trace) and 4 ohms (gray trace) than it was in the left channel (blue and green traces) but is still relatively high in level despite the low output level. (The notch at 60Hz in the red trace is due to the signal being in opposite polarity to the hum at that frequency.)

The distortion waveform was predominantly the subjectively innocuous second harmonic (fig.8). It is higher in the left channel (fig.9, blue trace) than in the right channel (red trace). The third harmonic was equal in level in both channels, with higher-order harmonics much lower in level. As expected from fig.3, the level of the random noisefloor was lower in the left

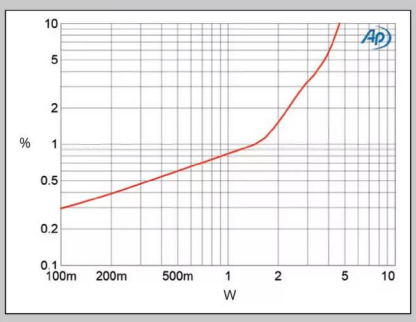

Fig.5 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, KR output tubes, 4 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

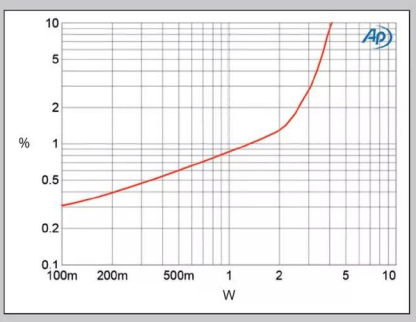

Fig.6 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, KR output tubes, 4 ohm output tap, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

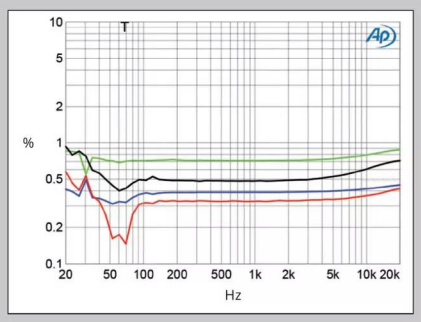

Fig.7 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, Electro-Harmonix output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 1V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left green, right gray).

circuit boards, known for their improved consistency, efficiency, and sometimes lower noise, though the sonic impact of that might be subtle to the untrained ear. "We use high-grade circuit boards to guarantee short, balanced, uninterrupted signal paths and for ease of QC, safer shipping, and efficiency of servicing," Ng stated. "We design and draw the circuit boards ourselves, in house, for perfection and durability, which is crucial for achieving the best sound." They use their own solid-core, copper wire with PVC insulation and Teflon-coated silver-plated wire from Belden.

Triode Lab amplifiers employ negative feedback to reduce distortion, stabilize gain, extend frequency response, and perhaps also to lower output impedance—but not a lot. "All our amps have a minimal amount of negative feedback, which is needed for good sound quality, stable performance, refinement, noise control, etc.," wrote Noam Bronstein. "It also increases reliability and the ability to drive more types of speakers."

To better understand a designer's sonic vision, I always ask about their reference systems. Frank Ng's Triode Lab system is a study in contrasts: Esoteric SACD player/DAC and an Accuphase tuner serve up music on the digital side. A Linn LP12 turntable with a Nagaoka MP300 cartridge spins vinyl. Ng employs a variety of speakers, ranging from single-driver designs to two-way and three-way configurations, with a focus on high-sensitivity speakers including horns. Furutech, Cardas, and Finale cables complete the chain.

Setup

The 2A3 EVO found a comfortable home on the lowest shelf of my Salamander rack. To optimize performance, I arranged three of Norman Varney's A/V RoomService large Equipment Vibration Protectors (EVPs) under the amp. I have found that the EVPs reduce noise and improve clarity without sacrificing dynamics or character; in this respect, they're better than various cork and rubber isolation options I've tried. Then I simply connected it to the rest of the system—see Associated Equipment for details—turned the system on, and started listening.

Listening

I began evaluating the 2A3 EVO with jazz new and old: Melissa Aldana's brand-new album *Echoes of the Inner Prophet* (2024, Blue Note 582774B); *Montage* (1955, Savoy MG-12029), which features separate tracks led by trombonist Eddie Bert, pianist John Mehegan, and trumpeter Donald Byrd, with appearances by Hank Jones, Kenny Clarke, and Paul Chambers among others; vocalist Helen Merrill's terrific self-titled debut (1955, EmArcy MG-30006); and Tower of Power's *In the Slot* (1975, Warner Bros. BS 2880).

Similar to other SET amps I've heard, the 2A3 EVO brought fleshy textures, rich tonal color, a sense of naturalness—and, yes, flow, which I've found evades some SETs. For instance, the Art Audio Diavolo played with the expected SET bloom and fine tonal color but imparted a plasticky sheen to music, which grated over time, blunting a sense of flow. The 2A3 EVO did the opposite: Music breathed. It sounded sweet, round, voluptuous, as if the amp itself was relaxed, inviting me to sink deeper and lose myself in the sound. Its richness never dampened its clarity or the clarity of instrumental or vocal lines.

Paired with Gaboury's Heretic AD614 loudspeakers (specified at 97dB/2.83V/m, grilles off), the sound was deep and lush, pushing precision and excitement from the AD614's 12" coaxial driver with its treated-paper cone and 1" tweeter. Considering Gaboury's

measurements, continued

channel than in the right. Fig.9 was taken with the KR output tubes; the spectrum was identical with the Electro-Harmonix tubes.

Whether fitted with the KR output tubes or the Electro-Harmonix tubes, with the 2A3 EVO's 8 ohm tap driving an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at 1W peak into 8 ohms (fig.10), the 1kHz difference product lay at –49dB (0.3%) in the left channel (blue trace) and at –61dB (0.1%) in the right channel (red trace). The higher-order intermodulation products at 18kHz and 21kHz were lower in level, at –67dB (0.05%) in both channels.

Troubled by the differences in distortion and noisefloor in the two channels, I swapped all the tubes between the channels and repeated some of the tests. The second harmonic and second-order intermodulation product were now higher in the right channel, and the random noisefloor was now higher in the left channel rather than the right. These results suggest that one of the input tubes or the driver tubes had aged out of specification.

The Triode Lab 2A3 EVO's measured performance is what I would expect from a design with a single-ended, tubed output stage and little or no loop negative feedback. While the maximum power is limited and the distortion at lower powers is relatively high in level, the cleanly extended high frequencies and the excellent squarewave performance, coupled with the fact that the distortion doesn't rise at low frequencies, indicate that the output transformers are of high quality.

—John Atkinson

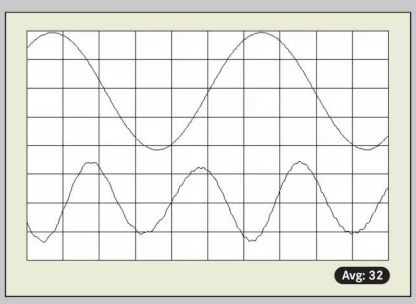

Fig.8 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, Electro-Harmonix output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, left channel, 1kHz waveform at 1W into 8 ohms, 0.97% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

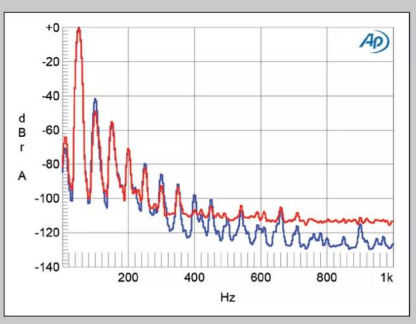

Fig.9 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, KR output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

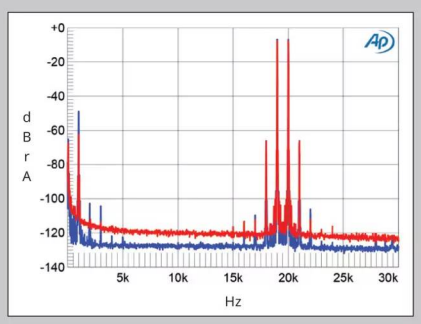

Fig.10 Triode Lab 2A3 EVO, KR output tubes, 8 ohm output tap, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 1W peak into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

involvement in Triode Lab, it's hardly surprising that these two products worked well together.

Using the stock Electro-Harmonix 2A3 EHs, the 2A3 EVO traded ultimate detail for a rich-sounding whole. Though lacking ultimate treble extension and soundstage size, with these tubes the amp produced the essence of the music's flow, drawing me in as live music does, filling the room with a physical presence, free of etch or congestion. Unlike more analytical amps, the 2A3 EVO painted music as a rich, warm, colorfully toned picture. Instruments and voices on favorite LPs were imbued with color and brilliant textures, enveloping me like a warm summer breeze.

The 2A3 EVO portrayed rhythm with an unmissable liquidity. When I played Tower of Power's *In the Slot*, drummer David Garabaldi and bassist Francis Rocco Prestia Jr.'s powerful groove and interplay caught me up instantly, totally engrossed in the music, riding the flow state. There was no break in rhythm, only connection.

The 2A3 EVO reproduced bass as well as most tube amps I've had in house. Nothing was lacking; bass notes were deep, round, and weighty, if not the last word in lucidity or force.

This all held true on Helen Merrill's record. Merrill seems to float *above* the music in her own zone, her own sense of space and time.

On Melissa Aldana's *Echoes of the Inner Prophet*, her tenor sax extended far into the room, full bodied and deliciously textured. Drummer Kush Abadey's brushwork was gritty and vibrant, the metal brushes on plastic drumhead beautifully resolved and easy to follow. The upper notes of Fabian Almazan's piano sparkled. Lage Lund's guitar had roundness, fullness, and bite. Treble was open and clear, mids lush but radiant, bass deep, tight, and full. The music was well balanced, chunky, and creamy, all at once. And communicative.

Why mess with a good thing? Because there were other tubes to try.

At first, the KR Audio 2A3s seemed to echo the Electro-Harmonix's warmth, but now the treble was more extended, the soundstage wider and taller. There was a bit more emphasis on the upper mids, making the music seem sharper. Acoustic bass played tighter, each note more distinct and powerful. The soundstage got a little flatter; bloom was traded for better separation. Abadey's brushwork grew cleaner, while Lund's guitar acquired more luster and a sharper edge. Aldana's tenor sax retained its intimacy while gaining sinew, as she worked her instruments full range from birdlike, high-pitched calls, to fat, belching lows that recalled Don Byas and Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis.

Herb's NOS RCA 2A3s brought about further transformation. The soundstage exploded in width and depth and revealed a wealth of detail in the expanded space, which previously was veiled. Treble notes were crisper and more energetic, while the upper bass tightened and gained focus and weight. Music became more human, more alive. A refreshing clarity brought instruments closer, revealing those subtle nuances superior musicians express. I felt closer to the musicians, at one with them in the studio.

It was time to trade the Heretics for Greg Roberts's Volti Audio Razzes, also specified at 97dB/2.83V/m (grilles off). Keeping Herb's RCA 2A3s in line, the Razzes further altered my perceptions. Scale increased. Aldana's tenor, Abadey's drums, and Lund's guitar were now close to life-size, and the soundstage was even wider and deeper. The space around the instruments increased. Where did those synths come from? I felt musicians performing in front of me. Aldana's music was more powerful.

Comparison

Another EVO, the PrimaLuna 400 EVO tubed integrated ($5995), is capable of outputting a whopping 38Wpc into 8 ohms. It produced a bigger soundstage, but it lacked the bloom and sweetness of tone the Triode Lab produced. The PrimaLuna was more energetic and produced more detail, yet somehow I felt less connected to the music—and that is something the PrimaLuna excels at. Compared to the 2A3 EVO, the music kept its distance. The PrimaLuna on paper has more to offer: It can drive a wider variety of speakers and power tubes, includes a headphone amp, a MM phono stage, remote, triode/ultralinear switching, more inputs, subwoofer, and tape outs. Nothing comes free!

Conclusion

The Triode Lab 2A3 EVO isn't for everyone. Its 3.5Wpc power output will only drive sensitive speakers. In contrast to many modern integrated amplifiers, it lacks features like a built-in DAC, tone controls, room correction, etc. Some might consider the look utilitarian, though I consider it beautiful. But when used in the right system with the right high-sensitivity speakers, it excels where it matters most, in sonic performance. It makes music in such a convincing fashion, engaging the senses with every genre, that music lovers will cherish it. It's the rare electric machine that sets emotion in motion, no holds barred.

Herb Reichert recently forwarded a YouTube video of bluegrass great Tony Rice explaining what is, essentially, the flow state. Imagine a freight train barreling down the tracks, then imagine a hobo in one freight car, moving around in the car as the train bullets ahead. "The hobo is dancing, swaying, finding his own unique rhythm apart from the encompassing forward motion of the train. He's found freedom."

The Triode Lab 2A3 EVO does something like that, record after record, putting listeners into a state like that, weaving them into the fabric of the sound, and the soul of the music as a great musician plays it, as a child or that hobo—drunk on velocity, wine, or life—might experience it.

If you have a chance to hear this amplifier, take it. You're in for a treat. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources VPI Avenger Direct turntable with 12" VPI FatBoy tonearm, Hana Umami Blue MC cartridge; Thorens TD 124 turntable with 9.5" The Wand Plus tonearm, Luxman LMC-5 MC cartridge.
Digital sources HoloAudio May DAC, Sonore opticalRendu, Roon Nucleus+, Small Green Computer power supply, TRENDnet switch, Apple iPad mini.
Preamplifiers PrimaLuna EVO 400 phono, Aurorasound Viva II phono.
Integrated amplifiers PrimaLuna EVO 400.
Loudspeakers Heretic AD614, Volti Audio Razz, Voxativ Ampeggio 2024.
Cables Interconnects: Agent Pur, AudioQuest Pegasus, Analysis Plus Silver Apex, Triode Wire Labs Spirit II (RCA), Shindo (XLR to RCA). Speaker: AudioQuest William Tell (10'). AC: AudioQuest NRG Z, Triode Wire Labs Obsession NCF.
Accessories Pro-Ject VC-S2 ALU, Humminguru record cleaning machines; AOCISKA soft bristle brush; AudioQuest PQ-707 and IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius power conditioners; Salamander five-tier Archetype rack (2); A/V RoomService Ltd. Equipment Vibration Protectors (EVPs); IKEA Aptitlig bamboo chopping boards (under turntable, preamp, power, and integrated amps); mahogany blocks (three to a stack), under IKEA boards.—**Ken Micallef**

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Life is not for Goldilocks. "Just right" is elusive. Every day, we face countless situations where our choices are either too many to navigate or too few to find satisfaction. Behavioral scientists call those dissatisfying alternatives "choice overload" and "choice deprivation," respectively.[1]

I think choice overload may scare some audiophiles away from the glorious world of streaming, where the bulk and finite scope of a physical music-media collection can be traded for (or augmented by) many more listening choices. If you're willing to explore and choose, you can hear as deep and wide as most musical rabbit holes are likely to go, and then return to your favorite songs with a couple of finger-pecks on your phone.

For some people, all that choice is intimidating, paralyzing, overwhelming, highly stressful. That's no way to enjoy music! I sympathize. I'm not ready to leave physical media behind. But I am very happy in the streaming present. In fact, I urge the hesitant: Cast aside your fears and trepidations, sign up for a free month of Qobuz, Spotify, Tidal, Apple Music, you decide—then take it slow. At first, avoid browsing—just search for the music you want to hear. Try something new each day. Over time, you'll adjust to the overwhelming abundance. By the end of the month, especially with a full-resolution service like Qobuz, Tidal, or Apple Music+HD, you may not want to give it up. The future-present beckons loudly.

Which brings me to the subject of this review, the WiiM Amp.[2] This is modernity: A company (LinkPlay, which is based in California) put a lot of thought and care into designing a neat-looking amplifier-gadget and the accompanying app, both branded WiiM, offering music fans the wide world of streaming. It can access digital files on your NAS server and connect to the interwebs by Wi-Fi or Ethernet cable. It was recently certified Roon Ready. For your other sources, there are optical and HDMI-ARC digital inputs, a USB flash drive port—even an analog-in connection.

What sets the WiiM Amp above most other similar-cost streaming options is that it doesn't need any external electronics and it doesn't have its own little speakers. Rather, it has an amplifier powerful enough (60Wpc into 8 ohms, 120Wpc into 4 ohms) to drive all but difficult passive loudspeaker loads—just add speakers and wires. The package even includes an Alexa-based voice-activated remote control, though the best way to run it is from the robust app, available for Apple and Android. The app includes many tone-shaping (DSP) options including graphic and parametric virtual equalizers plus 23 EQ presets. You can even use the WiiM Amp as an alarm clock, waking up to whatever music or internet radio station you want. And it transmits its streams over Bluetooth and

1 Here is one among many articles on modern life and choices: tinyurl.com/mr3pry2k.
2 See wiimhome.com/wiimamp/overview.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Solid state, class-D stereo streamer/integrated amplifier outputting up to 60Wpc into 8 ohms, 120Wpc into 4 ohms (both equivalent to 17.8dBW). SNR: 98dB. THD+N: 0.002% (–92dB). Analog inputs: 1 single-ended on RCA. Digital inputs: 1 TosLink, 1 HDMI-ARC, 1 USB-C. Streaming inputs: Ethernet (IEEE 802.11 b/g/n/ac Dual band, 10/100 Mbps LAN), Wi-Fi, Bluetooth (BT 5.1 A2DP Sink and Source, AVRCP BLE HID). Analog outputs: loudspeaker via banana/screw-terminal binding posts; mono line-level subwoofer via RCA (autodetecting cable insert, user-adjustable 30–200Hz crossover). Supported digital formats: MP3, AAC, ALAC, APE, FLAC, AIFF, WAV, WMA, OGG. Supported streaming protocols: AirPlay 2, Chromecast, Spotify Connect, Tidal Connect, Alexa Cast, DLNA. Digital EQ: 10-band Graphic EQ, 4-band parametric EQ, multiple presets via WiiM Home app. Roon Ready. Included accessories: Bluetooth, voice-controlled remote (Alexa compatible), power cable, 4K HDMI cable, RCA signal cable, TosLink cable.
Dimensions 7.48" (190mm) W × 2.48" (63mm) H × 7.48" (190mm) D. Weight: 4.1lb (1.84kg).
Finish Silver or "Space Gray."
Serial number of unit reviewed P1TF240413458. Designed in California, manufactured in China.
Price: $299. Sold direct via Amazon. Warranty: 1 year.
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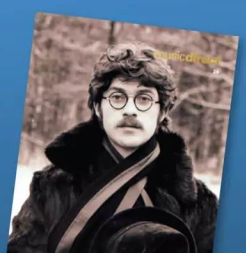

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AirPlay in case you want to listen on wireless headphones or on a wireless smart speaker in another room.

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How is this possible? It comes down to clever design in-house, a good manufacturing partner in China, selling through Amazon, and the use of high-quality, commodity-priced parts.

What's it made of?

Housed in a 7.5" × 7.5" × 3" aluminum box with a plastic bottom, with rounded corners and a Mac mini look, the WiiM Amp is a multifunction gadget run by an ARM Cortex-A53 quad-core computer with 512MB of DRAM and another 512MB of flash memory. That's the brains of the operation. There is a volume/power/play/pause switch-knob on the front, plus, as mentioned, a remote control, which (setting aside voice control) is useful for turning the volume up and down, turning the unit on and off, and not much else.

At the amplifier's audio-conversion core is an ESS Sabre DAC 9018 K2 "Hyperstream" chip. At the amplification core is a Texas Instruments TPA 3255 class-D amplifier. Also inside the "shell," as WiiM calls it, are Wi-Fi and Bluetooth transceivers.

Having a real computer means that DSP functions can be modified and added, plus the firmware/OS can be updated over the interwebs. During the time I had the WiiM Amp in my systems, there were four firmware updates, the last of which finalized Roon Ready certification. That may add extra appeal for a current or aspiring multiroom Roon user desiring a second or third system for the bedroom, office, kitchen, or den.

On the back, you'll find what you'd expect: binding posts that work with spades, bananas, or wire; RCA jacks for the line-level analog input; a USB jack for adding storage; and TosLink and HDMI-ARC digital inputs. There is also an RCA output for a

powered subwoofer, switchable on and off from the app. When a subwoofer is plugged in, the app allows a crossover point to be set anywhere in the range of 30–200Hz.

Based on my experiences, I think that's the WiiM's sweet spot: It's perfectly matched to a system with relatively sensitive stand-

MEASUREMENTS

I performed a complete set of measurements on the WiiM Amp with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system.[1] Before I did so, I installed the WiiM Home app on my iPad mini and connected the amplifier to my network with a CAT-5 Ethernet cable. The app (version 2.9.5.24041612) recognized the Amp, and I performed a factory reset.

Because the amplifier has a class-D output stage, I inserted an Audio Precision AUX-0025 passive low-pass filter between the test load and the analyzer. This filter mitigates noise above 80kHz and eliminates noise above 200kHz that would otherwise drive the SYS2722's input circuitry into slew-rate limiting. Without the filter, 470mV of ultrasonic noise with a center frequency of 460kHz was present at the amplifier's output terminals. I used the Audio Precision filter for all the tests other than frequency response. Because it operates in class-D, it wasn't necessary to precondition the WiiM Amp. Nevertheless, I left it powered up for 30 minutes before I started testing. The amplifier does get warm; after a couple of hours, the temperature of the top panel was 101.1°F (38.4°C).

Looking first at the WiiM Amp's behavior with its single-ended line input, the amplifier preserved absolute polarity. WiiM doesn't specify the Amp's input impedance; I measured 6250 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz and 6050 ohms at 20kHz. The voltage gain

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

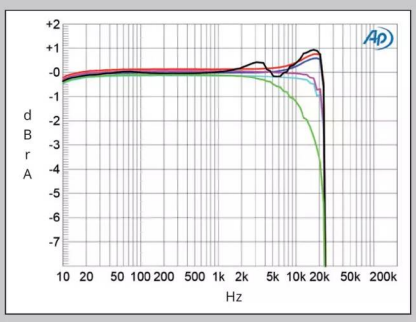

Fig.1 WiiM Amp, line input, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), and 2 ohms (green) (1dB/vertical div.).

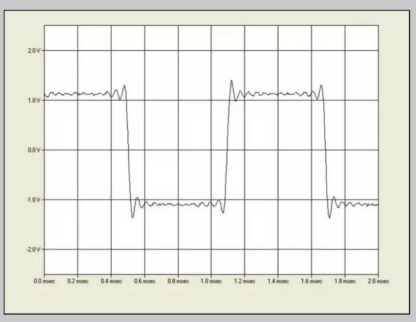

Fig.2 WiiM Amp, line input, small-signal 1kHz square-wave into 8 ohms.

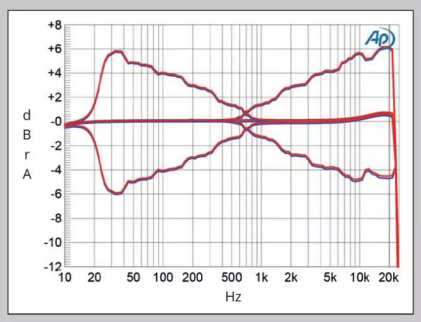

Fig.3 WiiM Amp, line input, frequency response at 2.83V into 8 ohms with EQ set to Flat, Bass Booster, Bass Reducer, Treble Booster, and Treble Reducer (left channel blue, right red) (2dB/vertical div.).

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I would not use this amplifier with hard-to-drive speakers; that's asking too much of it. But we'll see what JA's measurements show.

All the things it does

The key to this gadget is the app, called WiiM Home. Understand the app, and you'll know what the WiiM Amp can do. It goes layers deep, with a wealth of parameters and choices, allowing full control of the listening experience. Yes, it could trigger decision paralysis! It's well thought out, though, and one need not absorb all its functionality at once. I introduced myself to the WiiM Amp by unpacking it, hooking it up to a pair of Behringer Truth 2031P passive studio monitors, pushing the control knob/switch until lights started blinking, then pairing it by Bluetooth to my iPhone 15. In seconds, I was streaming music from Qobuz and Spotify's native apps.

Then I downloaded the WiiM app and read the quick-start instructions. I went through the setup process and paired it to my Wi-Fi network and to its remote control (which operates over Bluetooth), all using the phone. Then it bogged down during a firmware update. When it restarted, it couldn't find the Wi-Fi network.

When it comes to balky gadgets, this wasn't my first rodeo. The WiiM Amp remained paired to my phone via Bluetooth. So using the app, I shut it down. Outside the app, I unplugged it from the wall and let it cool its heels as I ate dinner.

measurements, continued

at 1kHz into 8 ohms was lower than usual for an integrated amplifier, at 20.5dB. The gain from the mono subwoofer output was –6dB at 100Hz with the crossover set to the same frequency with the app, sourced from a low 55 ohms.

The loudspeaker output impedance, including the series impedance of 6' of spaced-pair cable, was a relatively low 0.1 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, rising to 1.1 ohms at 20kHz. As a result, the variation in the frequency response with our standard simulated loudspeaker[2] (fig.1, gray trace) was minimal in the bass and midrange but reached ±0.3dB in the mid-treble region. The response into 8 ohms (blue and red traces) and 4 ohms (cyan, magenta) rose by almost 1dB in the top audio octave but was down by 1dB into 2 ohms (green trace). The output into all loads dropped precipitously above 22kHz, which indicates that the line input is digitized at a sample rate of 48kHz. The Amp's reproduction of a 1kHz squarewave into 8 ohms (fig.2) featured overshoot and ringing due to the A/D converter's antialiasing filter. A 10kHz squarewave was reproduced as a pure sinewave (not shown), due to the third and higher-order harmonics being eliminated by the converter.

The WiiM Home app features a 10-band

2 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

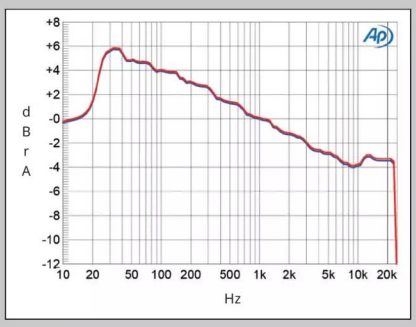

Fig.4 WiiM Amp, line input, frequency response at 2.83V into 8 ohms with EQ set to Small Speakers (left channel blue, right red) (2dB/vertical div.).

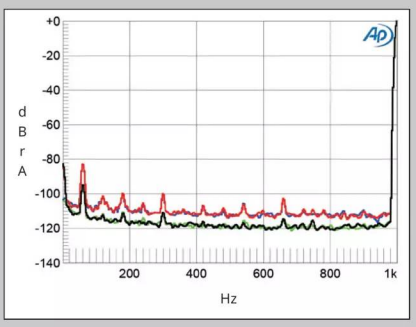

Fig.5 WiiM Amp, line input, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with volume control set to the maximum (left channel blue, right red) and to –12dB (left green, right gray) (linear frequency scale).

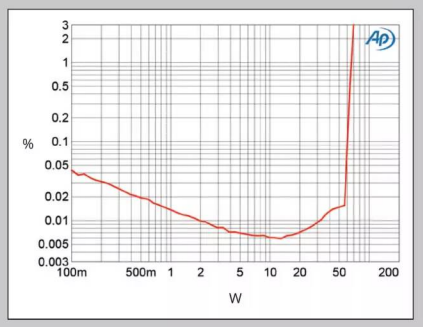

Fig.6 WiiM Amp, line input, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

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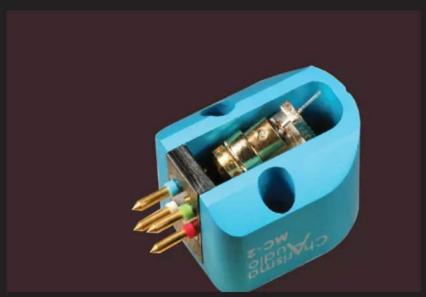

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I returned to it that evening and plugged it in. It found the network and began communicating with my phone over Wi-Fi. From then on, I was able to stream Qobuz through the WiiM app. (I had to sign onto Qobuz from within the app; the same would be true of the many other services available that stream directly.) Like other streaming gadgets, the WiiM Amp uses Spotify Connect and Tidal Connect to access those services. You control the music through the service's app, but it's the WiiM computer that's interacting with the service's servers, via technologies known as UPnP and DLNA; the app on your tablet or phone is merely the director.

I was up and running. I pushed the Browse button at the bottom of the app, and all my music, streamed and local, was at my fingertips. Want to choose a different input? Scroll to the bottom to select. At the top of the menu you'll see your home NAS server and its music library, plus the USB drive if you have plugged one in.

About that USB drive: It can be formatted as VFAT, NTFS, or EXT4. The USB socket can provide up to 650mA of current, enough to drive any thumb drive and many external SSDs but not enough to power mechanical hard drives that lack their own power supply.

To find music, select Artists, Albums, or Songs and search at the top of the screen. Go back to the Browse screen and scroll down to see the various streaming-service options, including the usual radio suspects: various BBC feeds, iHeartRadio, something called Calm Radio, Napster (which I thought was long dead).

After several hours playing with the WiiM app's functions, spread over several days, the firmware update that added Roon Readiness happened. To start using Roon, you must set up the server on your local network (if it isn't set up already), go to Settings > Audio on the Roon server, and Enable the WiiM Amp as a Device (endpoint). It had been a while since I used Roon, so I had to sign in again, on the computer and on my phone. All that done, I could operate the WiiM Amp from Roon on the computer or through the Roon app.

Things went as expected. I suspect that some potential buyers will use the WiiM app minimally, just for setup, then mostly use Roon to play music. Others will take advantage of the WiiM Home app's wide and deep functionality. More choices. Please remain calm.

measurements, continued

digital graphic equalizer, with several preset EQ settings. Five of the basic settings are shown in fig.3: Flat, Bass Booster, Bass Reducer, Treble Booster, and Treble Reducer. The boost and cut reach ±6dB compared with Flat. Other EQ presets have more exotic names, like Game, Hip-Hop, Dance, Movie, and Lounge. Fig.4 shows the effect of one that intrigued me, the Small Speakers setting. The response tilts down by 10dB between 30Hz and 9kHz.

Channel separation, examined with the AUX-0025 passive low-pass filter, was 67dB across the audioband. (Looking at an oscilloscope screen while I performed this test, I could see that the crosstalk was due to signal leakage, not noise.) The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio, taken with the Audio Precision filter, the single-ended input shorted to ground, and the volume control set to the maximum, was a good 70dB ref. 1W into 8 ohms. This ratio improved to an excellent 86dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz–22kHz, and to 90dB when A-weighted. Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noisefloor while the WiiM drove a 1kHz tone at 1Wpc into 8 ohms (fig.5) revealed low levels of both random noise and power-supply–related spuriae. The blue and red traces in this graph were taken with the volume control set to the maximum; reducing the volume by 12dB and increasing the input signal by the same 12dB, so that the output was still 1W into 8 ohms, dropped the noisefloor by up to 8dB (green and gray traces)

The WiiM's maximum power is specified as 60Wpc into 8 ohms, 120Wpc into 4

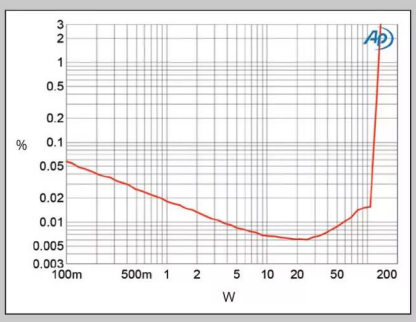

Fig.7 WiiM Amp, line input, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

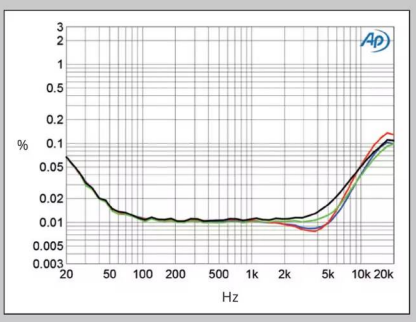

Fig.8 WiiM Amp, line input, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.67V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red) and 4 ohms (left green, right gray).

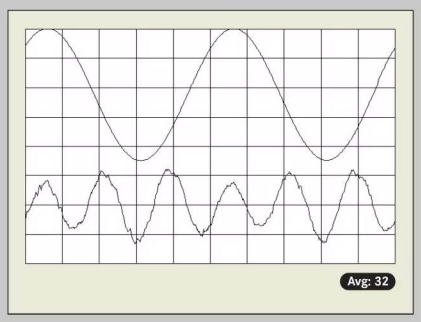

Fig.9 WiiM Amp, line input, 1kHz waveform at 20W into 8 ohms, 0.01% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

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How does it sound?

The design is neat and tidy; the app is well done; the build feels solid. Yet I had serious doubts that the WiiM Amp would sound good enough to deserve a mention in *Stereophile*. How could they pack all that functionality *and* good sound into something this cheap in price yet *not* in look and feel? You're reading this in the pages of *Stereophile*, so you know my doubts were unfounded. It sounds pretty darn good! It's peppy but not thin, not the fastest amp ever made but plenty dynamic. And those DSP tone-shaping controls allow you to pair it with speakers in a way that accents any system's strengths.

For a few days, I used the WiiM Amp driving those Behringer passive monitors as my TV sound system. I connected my ancient Sony Wega digital CRT TV's analog outputs to the WiiM Amp's RCA inputs. Via cable from a TiVo box and streaming from a Roku, the sound was as expected. Some channels and services sound better than others. This system was far more revealing than TV speakers. I'm finding that with television, the better the audio system, the more I dislike the sound quality of many programs.

Next, I connected a newer TV via TosLink—same speakers. Much TV sound is a pig. The WiiM Amp's DSP EQ can be used to apply some lipstick. Sometimes, it's hopeless.

During the time it was hooked up to the Behringer speakers, I tested the various streaming and file-playing options. Everything worked. The WiiM-Behringer combo sounded fine with any kind of music. I also spent some time listening on a pair of vintage Klipsch Heresys, which have nice, wide imaging but are notoriously light in the low end. I added a KRK subwoofer, and after some adjusting of the subwoofer level and crossover points, I very much liked that setup. The efficient Klipsch speakers posed no challenge to the WiiM Amp, and the subwoofer passthrough worked as expected. I enjoyed streaming some recent LP needle drops from my NAS library, especially of the new Rhino High Fidelity AAA remaster of the Cars' second album, *Candy-O* (Rhino Records RHF1 507). Its dry, popping, 1980s sound came through in spades, as did the tight low

measurements, continued

ohms, both equivalent to 17.4dBW. *Stereophile* defines an amplifier's clipping power as being when the THD+noise reaches 1%. With that criterion and with both channels driven, the Amp clipped at 66Wpc into 8 ohms (fig.6) and 129Wpc into 4 ohms (fig.7), both powers equivalent to 18.1dBW. The downward slope of the traces below 15W in figs.6 and 7 is due to the actual distortion lying beneath the random noisefloor. I therefore examined how the THD+N percentage varied with frequency at 12.67V, which is equivalent to 20W into 8 ohms and 40W into 4 ohms. The THD+N percentage was very low from 100Hz to 3kHz into both 8 ohms and 4 ohms (fig.8) but rose at the frequency extremes.

With a 1kHz signal at 20Wpc into 8 ohms, the distortion waveform was predominantly the third harmonic at 0.01% (fig.9). At low frequencies, the rise in THD+N seen in fig.8 was due to the second harmonic rising above the third (fig.10). With an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at the same peak power into 8 ohms (fig.11), the second-order difference product at 1kHz lay close to –110dB (0.0003%). The higher-order intermodulation products were higher in level, though still very low in absolute terms. The intermodulation distortion remained very low at 40Wpc into 4 ohms (not shown).

I examined the behavior of the WiiM's D/A conversion circuitry with Ethernet data sourced from Roon and with the optical input. The latter locked to S/PDIF data

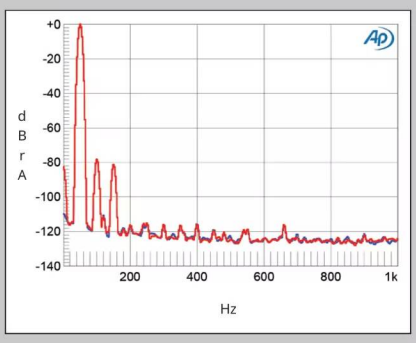

Fig.10 WiiM Amp, line input, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 20Wpc into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

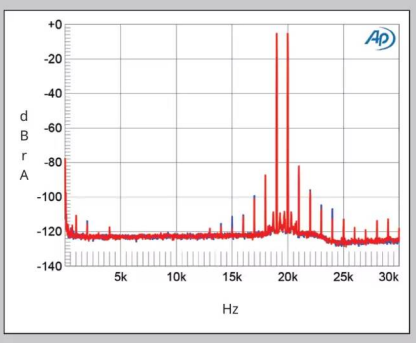

Fig.11 WiiM Amp, line input, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 20Wpc peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

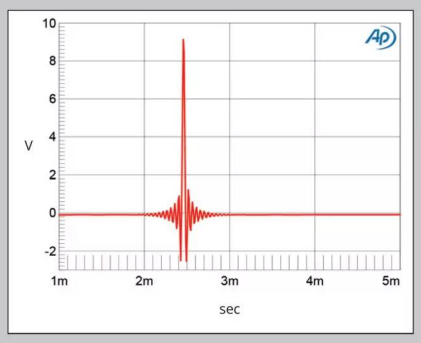

Fig.12 WiiM Amp, optical input, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

end and vocals, more confident and better-recorded here than on the group's first album. Another listening "trip" I enjoyed was Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (24/192, Pink Floyd Records/Qobuz). The WiiM-Klipsch-KRK system sounded appropriately psychedelic-trippy, not harsh, not mellow. I closed my eyes and let the odd mind of Syd Barrett pull me into a musical dreamstate.

Back to the present. I moved the WiiM Amp into my office and connected it to a pair of Amphion One18's, which are relatively easy to drive and can produce quite a bit of bass from their small boxes. They are quite revealing in the midrange and treble, especially nearfield, which is how I have them set up. I listened carefully for realistic sound of midrange instruments and whether, eg, loud female voices crackled or fuzzed or otherwise distorted. I heard no such things. Playing with the BBC feeds in the WiiM Amp Home app, I selected Radio Manchester and stumbled into a great hour of 1970s and '80s dance music. I reflexively cranked up the volume and heard crisp beats and pumping bass. The speakers didn't overtax the WiiM Amp; the WiiM Amp met the challenge. The sound was what I'll call modern—punchy and somewhat sharp-edged—more so than the sound produced with the speakers' usual driver, a circa-2000 McIntosh MA6500 integrated. With certain kinds of music, the McIntosh's warmer, deeper sound is preferable. On any music, it's an unfair comparison.

Compared to what?

For an even more unfair comparison, I took the WiiM Amp up to the living room and plugged it into my B&W 808 full-range speakers. The bass was noticeably flabby, to the point that it sounded exaggerated. The strong bass-instrument tonality I'm accustomed to went missing in the 50th Anniversary remaster of "Concrete Jungle" on Bob Marley's *Catch A Fire* (24/96 FLAC, Universal/Qobuz). Plenty of floor shaking, but not enough note-shaping. The same was true of Phil Lesh's bass in the live version of Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" on *Grateful Dead* (aka Skull and Roses) (24/96 FLAC, Warner/Qobuz). With the best power amps, the front edge of each note is clearly defined; the sounds of both the bass instrument and the amplifier color the satisfying tonality. With the WiiM amp, it could have been a bass keyboard, with plenty of oomph but not a sharp representation of the whole sound.

With the big speakers, I also noticed that the stereo image was flatter and more confined than I'm used to. The location and directionality cues were there, but the image didn't extend behind, in front of, or above the speakers as much as I am used to. And there was a slight "class-D glaze" to the upper midrange, not enough to ruin my listening pleasure—probably not even noticeable if you

measurements, continued

with sample rates up to 192kHz. The Amp's digital inputs preserved absolute polarity and with the volume control set to the maximum, a 1kHz digital signal at –20dBFS resulted in an output level of 2.283V from loudspeaker outputs, which is exactly 20dB below the amplifier's clipping voltage into 8 ohms. It is rare to find a gain architecture as well-managed as this.

The Amp's reconstruction filter is a conventional linear-phase type, with time-symmetrical ringing on either side of the single full-scale sample (fig.12). With 44.1kHz-sampled white noise, the Amp's response rolled off sharply above 20kHz (fig.13, red and magenta traces), reaching full stop-band suppression at 24kHz. No aliased images are visible with a full-scale tone at 19.1kHz (blue and cyan traces) and the third harmonic is the highest in level, at –66dB (0.05%). Some low-level sidebands are visible around the 19.1kHz tone and its harmonics, these of unknown origin, but possibly due to jitter (see later).

The WiiM's frequency response with data sampled at 44.1, 96, and 192kHz (fig.14) followed the same basic shape before dropping off sharply just below half of each the sample rate. Channel separation (not shown) was significantly better than it had been from the analog input, at >110dB at low frequencies and still 80dB at the top of the audioband.

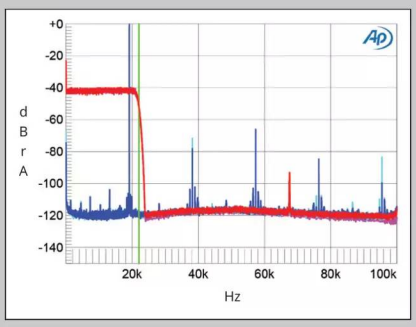

Fig.13 WiiM Amp, optical input, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan), with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

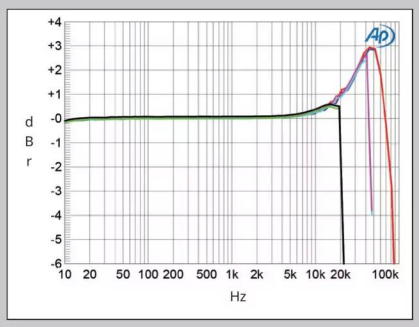

Fig.14 WiiM Amp, optical input, frequency response at –12dBFS into 100k ohms with data sampled at: 44.1kHz (left channel green, right gray), 96kHz (left cyan, right magenta), and 192kHz (left blue, right red) (1dB/vertical div.).

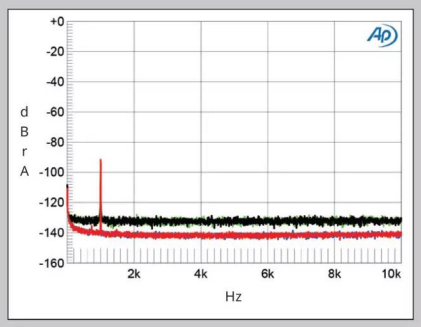

Fig.15 WiiM Amp, optical input, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 16-bit data (left channel cyan, right magenta) and 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

haven't listened to a lot of class-D and class-AB amplifiers playing the same music at the same SPLs through the same speakers.

When I reconnected the B&Ws to my reference streaming system—dCS Bartók, Benchmark LA-4 line amp, and AHB2 power amplifier—things sounded right again. Comparing this system to the WiiM Amp is beyond unfair, but checking in with the reference system from time to time is essential in any review. No one will be surprised to learn that I preferred my reference system's sound for careful listening.

In summary, the sound differences between the WiiM Amp and my favorite amps, driving my B&W 808's, weren't so great that I wanted to ban the WiiM from my living room. Still, they were quite audible, to my ears.

What's an audiophile to do?

A note to makers of high-end streamers and streamer-DACs: Please study the WiiM app. It has a better user interface and an app-wide search function, combining streaming services with local NAS libraries. An excellent app for phones or tablets is part of the price-value proposition with a streaming device, even for a company whose main focus is on sound. By that measure, WiiM scores high.

For someone used to a highly detailed and resolving system, the WiiM Amp probably isn't the best choice as a reference. Presumably, it's not intended to be. Where then? In my view, it belongs in a simple entry-level system. It's a great way to start out with inexpensive or hand-me-down speakers before moving up the food chain. Or maybe it's for TV sound or a system in a room where you want casual music but don't expect to listen closely—although it's better than it needs to be for that application. Roon Readiness and Wi-Fi mean it will work well in a multiroom system. Consider it akin to the 1970s silver-faced 45Wpc receiver but consider that the price of one of those—about $300 in 1977 dollars—is equivalent to more than $1500 today.

For a young audiophile or someone on a limited budget who decides the "smart speaker" or TV soundbar isn't getting it done, the WiiM Amp is almost a no-brainer. I say "almost" because there are also speaker-gadgets out there that do most of the same functions and have everything built into loudspeakers that sound good. For some, that may be the best solution, especially if living space is tight. If you already own speakers, or if you think you might want to upgrade from a soundbar or "smart" speakers, the WiiM Amp would be a good choice.

For more established audiophiles, I think the WiiM Amp deserves serious consideration as the heart of a second system built around a pair of smaller, midline speakers, or for a TV system that will occasionally be used for music-listening or radio-over-internet streaming. It may disappoint if connected to the best full-range speakers, but why would anyone but a *Stereophile* reviewer do that?

Check it out. You might like it. And if you don't, Amazon has a good return policy. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Bartók streaming DAC, Oppo DV-981HD universal disc player.
Preamplifier Benchmark LA-4.
Power amplifier Benchmark AHB2.
Integrated amplifier McIntosh MA6500.
Loudspeakers B&W 808, Amphion One18, Behringer Truth 2031P, Klipsch Heresy.—**Tom Fine**

Fig.15 shows the spectrum of the WiiM's output as it decoded dithered data representing a 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 16-bit and 24-bit data. The increase in bit depth lowers the noisefloor level by 10dB, which suggests that the Amp's DAC offers between 17 and 18 bits of resolution. With undithered 16-bit data representing a tone at exactly –90.31dBFS, the three DC voltage levels described by the data were obscured by noise (not shown). Intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones sampled at 44.1kHz and peaking at 0dBFS was very low, though there was an odd rise in the noisefloor on either side of the tones with Ethernet data (fig.16) that was not present with optical data.

The Amp offered good rejection of word-clock jitter, with both optical and Ethernet data. Fig.17 was taken with 16-bit optical J-Test data. All the odd-order harmonics of the LSB-level, low-frequency squarewave lay at the correct levels, shown by the sloping green line, and there is no broadening of the spectral spike at one-quarter the sample rate. However, a pair of low-level sidebands was present at ±328Hz. These were also present with 24-bit J-Test data (fig.18).

Overall, the WiiM Amp's measured performance is excellent with both analog and digital data, which I found astonishing considering it costs just $299!—**John Atkinson**

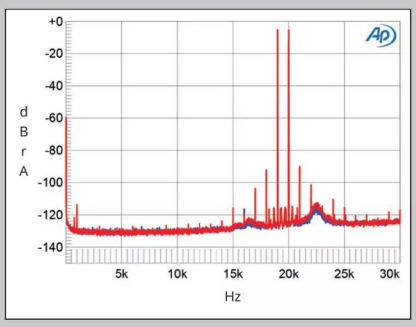

Fig.16 WiiM Amp, 24-bit Ethernet data, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS peak, sampled at 44.1kHz (left channel blue, right red).

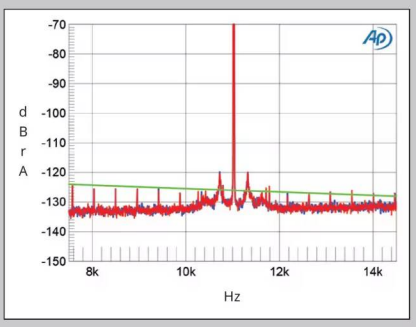

Fig.17 WiiM Amp, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz: 16-bit TosLink data (left channel blue, right red). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

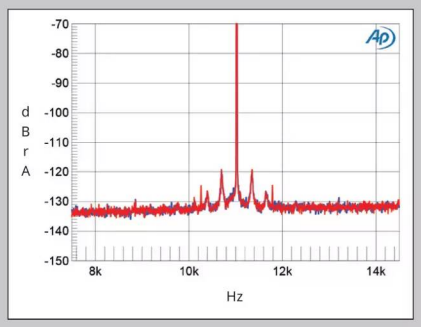

Fig.18 WiiM Amp, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz: 24-bit Ethernet data (left channel blue, right red). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

FOLLOW-UP

BY JOHN ATKINSON

THIS ISSUE: JA measures the new version of the DirectStream MK2 D/A processor with its latest firmware.

PS AUDIO PERFECTWAVE DIRECTSTREAM MK2 D/A PROCESSOR

When I reviewed the new version of PS Audio's classic D/A processor[1] in the June 2023 issue,[2] I enjoyed its sound quality, but some aspects of its measured performance concerned me. The impulse and frequency responses, the behavior of the reconstruction filter, the channel separation, the low intermodulation distortion, and the balanced and single-ended output impedances were all beyond reproach, and though harmonic distortion was higher in level than I was expecting, it was still sufficiently low. However, the level of ultrasonic noise was higher than I had found with PS Audio's original DirectStream processor running the "Windom" FPGA firmware: The MK2 processor running the v2.3.6 firmware had 210mV of ultrasonic noise in its balanced outputs, with a center frequency of 370kHz, compared with the earlier version's 11mV of noise.[3]

This noise will be due to the processor synchronously upsampling the input data to a 30-bit word length running at 56.4448MHz, followed by a digital-domain volume control. The resultant 50-bit, high–sample-rate data are resampled to quad-rate DSD and converted to analog with a low-pass filter. The problem was that enough of this noise leaked into the audioband to compromise the measured linearity and jitter rejection and limit resolution to 16 bits, even with 24-bit data.

Then, in the spring of 2024, PS Audio introduced the Mount Massive FPGA firmware for the DirectStream DAC MK2. The claimed improvements with this firmware were the lowering of ultrasonic noise by 30dB and audioband noise by 10dB. The Digital Lens FPGA buffer and user interface were also updated.

A follow-up review would be justified, so as our 2023 review sample had long since been returned, PS Audio sent me a sample with the new firmware. The processor's display indicated that this had the serial number 031053 and was fitted with the v3.1.0 firmware (the main OS firmware) and the 233-Massive firmware (specifically for the FPGA).

After some preliminary listening using Roon and the DirectStream's USB input—unlike the original DirectStream processor, the MK2 does not have an Ethernet port for audio data—I took the new MK2 into the test lab, where I performed a full set of measurements using first my Audio Precision SYS2722 system[4] then the magazine's higher-performance APx555 analyzer.

The MK2's maximum balanced output level at 1kHz was similar to the 2023 sample's, at 3.71V, but now a lower level of ultrasonic noise was present in its output: 167mV. This can be seen in fig.1, which shows the wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS with the v2.3.6 firmware (left channel blue, right cyan) and with the Mount Massive firmware (left red, right magenta). The level of the earlier firmware's ultrasonic noisefloor starts to rise above 40kHz, with the levels of the FFT bins reaching –90dBFS at 90kHz. By contrast, the Mount Massive's ultrasonic noisefloor doesn't start to rise until 70kHz and is up to 20dB lower below that frequency than it had been with the 2023 firmware.

What about the audioband noisefloor? Fig.2 shows the spectrum of the new DirectStream's low-frequency noisefloor while it drove a full-scale, 24-bit, 1kHz tone from the balanced outputs, with the volume control set to its maximum of "100." I used the APx555's brickwall input filter set to 20kHz to minimize the influence of the ultrasonic noise on the measurement. The individual elements of the PS Audio's random noisefloor lay around –122dBFS. To put this measurement into perspective, fig.3 shows the low-frequency noisefloor of the Weiss Helios processor that I reviewed in the March 2024 issue.[5] Measured under

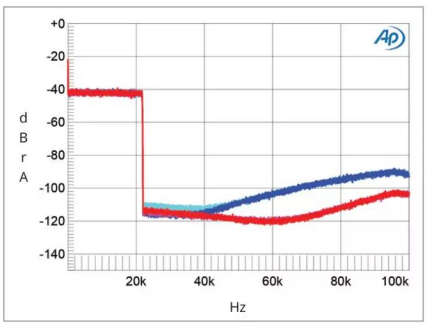

Fig.1 PS Audio DirectStream MK2, v3.1.0 and 233-Massive FPGA firmware, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta), and with v2.3.6 firmware (left blue, right cyan), with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

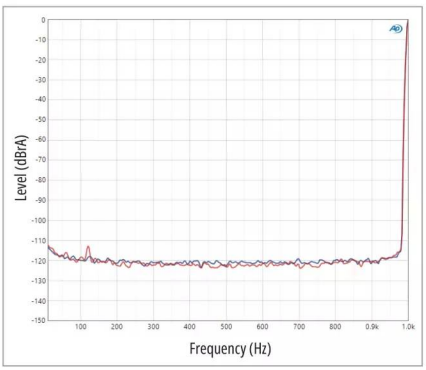

Fig.2 PS Audio DirectStream MK2, v3.1.0 and 233-Massive FPGA firmware, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at 0dBFS with 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

identical conditions, the Helios's noisefloor is 30dB lower in level than the DirectStream's. (Note the expanded vertical scale in this graph.)

How does this level of random noise affect the PS Audio's measured resolution? Fig.4 shows the spectrum of the 2023 DirectStream's output while it decoded dithered 24-bit data representing a 1kHz tone at –90dBFS. The level of the noisefloor is similar to that with the full-scale 1kHz tone in fig.2. However, when I repeated this test with the Mount Massive firmware, the level of the noisefloor dropped by up to 6dB (fig.5).

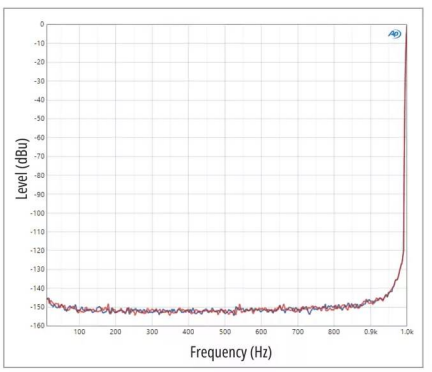

Fig.3 Weiss Helios, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at 0dBFS with 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

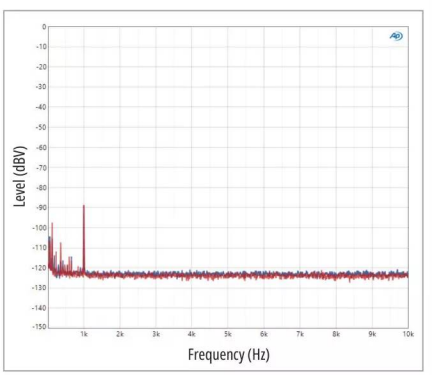

Fig.4 PS Audio DirectStream MK2, v2.3.6 firmware, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (10dB/vertical div.).

Despite this improvement, the DirectStream MK2's resolution is still limited to around 16 bits. I checked the spectrum shown in fig.5 against the same measurement that had been performed by PS Audio and is shown in fig.6. (Note the different aspect ratio of this graph.) My noisefloor looks cleaner than PS Audio's due to the fact that I average 32 FFT measurements to reduce the peak voltage of the noise whereas the manufacturer's appears to be a single capture. Nevertheless, the average level of the noisefloor appears identical in both graphs.[6]

Given that all recordings of music have a dynamic range that varies between 13–14 bits at low frequencies and 20 bits in the top audio octave, due to the presence of room and microphone noise, maximizing the measured resolution might be thought to be academic. I therefore spent a month using the Mount Massive DirectStream MK2, fed USB data from Roon via an AudioQuest JitterBug FMJ, as my daily driver. The rest of the system was the pair of Parasound JCA100 Tribute monoblock amplifiers that I reviewed in the June 2024 issue driving either KEF LS50 or GoldenEar BRX loudspeakers. I used Roon's parametric DSP to flatten and extend both loudspeakers' midbass region and controlled volume with the DirectStream's control.

My impressions of the PS Audio's sonic character were very similar to those in my original review. The overall balance was easy on the ear, the stereo imaging was precise, with good soundstage depth, and while the DirectStream MK2's retrieval of recorded detail and its sense of low-frequency drive weren't in the same class as those of the MBL N31 that I have been using as a reference D/A processor, my involvement in the music didn't seem compromised.

So, yes, the Mount Massive FPGA upgrade *does* lower the levels of both ultrasonic and audioband noise, but not to the point where the measured resolution competes with that of the highest-performing processors. Nevertheless, I concluded my 2023 review by writing "for want of a better word, the PS Audio DAC preserved each recording's 'musicality.'" Mount Massive offers the same benefit. ■

1 The DirectStream MK2 costs $7999 and is sold direct in the US. PS Audio, 4865 Sterling Dr., Boulder, CO 80301. Tel: (800) PSAUDIO, (720) 406-8946. Web: psaudio.com.

2 See stereophile.com/content/ps-audio-perfectwave-directstream-mk2-da-processor.

3 See stereophile.com/content/ps-audio-perfectwave-directstream-mk2-da-processor-measurements.

4 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

5 See stereophile.com/content/weiss-engineering-helios-da-processor.

6 Note, also, that the presence of odd-order harmonics in the PS Audio graph suggests that the source was not 24-bit dithered data but 16-bit undithered data. This doesn't affect my comments regarding the DirectStream MK2's resolution.

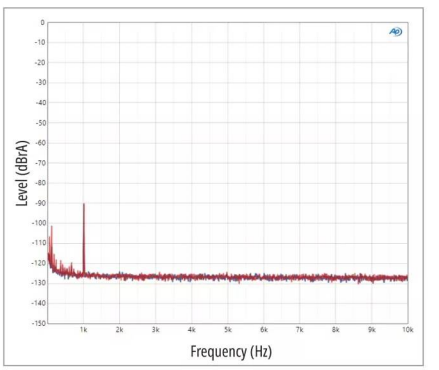

Fig.5 PS Audio DirectStream MK2, v3.1.0 and 233-Massive FPGA firmware, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (10dB/vertical div.).

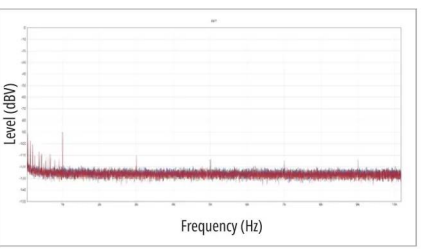

Fig.6 PS Audio DirectStream MK2, v3.1.0 and 233-Massive FPGA firmware, PS Audio's measurement, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, bit depth unknown (left blue, right red) (10dB/vertical div.).

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STRAITS SHOOTER

FOR A GUY BORN IN POSTWAR GLASGOW WHO SPENT HIS FORMATIVE YEARS ACROSS THE BORDER IN NORTHERN ENGLAND, MARK KNOPFLER HAS A KNACK FOR WRITING SONGS BASED IN AN AMERICAN ETHOS.

BY MIKE METTLER

SINCE DISBANDING DIRE STRAITS, WHICH HE LED FROM 1977 to 1992, Knopfler has evolved from headband-sporting guitar hero to acclaimed observational songwriter. Commencing with his 1996 solo debut *Golden Heart* (Warner Bros.) and continuing through *One Deep River*, his just-released 10th solo studio album, on the jazz-centric Blue Note label, Knopfler tells character-focused stories in arrangements that might cause listeners to think he's from Nashville, not Northumberland.

Post-Straits songs like "Sailing to Philadelphia" (the Charles Mason/Jeremiah Dixon exploratory history-lesson duet with James Taylor), "Boom, Like That" (a chronicle of America's mid–20th century fast-food explosion), and "Tunnel 13" (a new track, from *One Deep River*, about a 1923 train robbery in the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California) have extended the narrative thread laid down in vintage Dire Straits songs like "Romeo and Juliet," "Telegraph Road," and "Brothers in Arms"—all Knopfler compositions.[1]

Knopfler tells stories at the level of myth and legend. "I don't want to narrow it down for any-

1 "Sailing to Philadelphia" is the title track to Knopfler's second solo album, released in 2000. "Boom, Like That" appears on 2004's *Shangri-La*. "Romeo and Juliet" is on Dire Straits' third studio LP, 1980's *Making Movies*. "Telegraph Road" leads off 1982's *Love Over Gold*, and "Brothers in Arms" is the title track to the band's No. 1–charting album from 1985.

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one," Knopfler said in an interview with *Stereophile*. "Whenever I've tried to do that in the past, it seemed that they somehow lost their charm. The more specific you become in answering 'Was that about this? Was this about that?'—that just seems to make it smaller."

"Mark is all about the song," observes audio engineer, producer, and keyboardist Guy Fletcher, Knopfler's longtime coproducer and sounding board ever since he joined Dire Straits to record the band's 1985 blockbuster *Brothers in Arms*.[2] "He just wants to immerse you in it and not be flashy about it." Fletcher's job is on the technical side of storytelling. "It's about getting the right atmosphere down for the story at hand. It's down to great engineering and great mixing."

Knopfler's songs are all about story and myth, but his guitar still has plenty to say, and lately it's had plenty of opportunity to say it. In 2021, Dion—yes, *that* Dion—was working on the latest in his series of collaborative albums on the Keeping the Blues Alive Records label, *Stomping Ground*. Each of the album's 14 tracks has at least one guest star, most of them great guitarists. "I really didn't write 'Dancing Girl' for Mark Knopfler," Dion said, "but on the way home from the studio after I finished the song, I was listening to it in my truck, and I wound up thinking, 'Mark Knopfler's *gotta* play on this.'"

Knopfler signed on, but on his own terms. "I had the song laid out and the formula for it a certain way," Dion continued, "but Mark recommended, 'Why don't you put the bridge here, put that there, and take out a few of the dancing girl references since you mention that a few too many times?' I was okay with it because Mark's a bright guy. He's got a lot in his bank of musical knowledge."

The gnarly, vocal, instantly recognizable guitar tone on "Dancing Girl" is the result of Knopfler's unique fingerpicking style, which he long ago dubbed "the anchor." It involves planting the third and fourth fingers of his right hand against the guitar body just below the bottom string and strum-plucking the strings with the thumb and first two fingers. You can see the anchor in action on YouTube on the extended guitar solo in, eg, any live version of 1985's "Money for Nothing." That's the way you do it, indeed.

Just ahead of the release of *One Deep River*, Knopfler gathered a gaggle of notable guitarists, under the banner Mark Knopfler's Guitar Heroes, to record an updated version of his 1983 instrumental "Going Home (Theme From Local Hero)," a song that often served as the final encore for Straits arena and stadium dates and his own solo tours. The Heroes included most of the world's great rock guitarists: Steve Vai, Ronnie Wood, Pete Townshend, Peter Frampton—the list goes on. "We've got 67 players on it total, including the great Jeff Beck," notes Fletcher, who produced the new track and mixed the new version of "Going Home" in Atmos for the already-sold-out Blu-ray edition. "It was his last recording. What an amazing guy. Actually, Jeff and Mark were gearing up to do an album together before he passed."[3] David Gilmour, Peter Frampton, and Eric Clapton also make their marks on the track. Half the proceeds from the new "Going Home" will go to Teen Cancer America.[4]

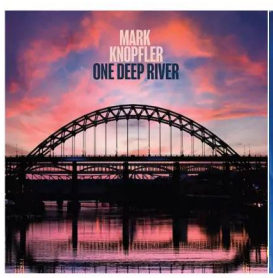
Will Knopfler tour the album? That isn't clear. Meanwhile, he's soldiering on, doing what he does best, writing songs and playing guitar. "I think I'd much rather be known as a songwriter than anything else," he said. "If I can write a good song, I *hope* we can make a decent record of it. That's all I want to do." This interview has been

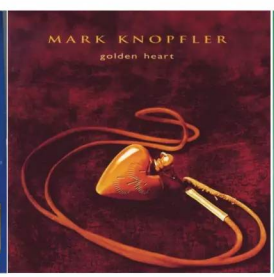
Clockwise from left: Greg Leisz, Mark Knopfler, Jim Cox, Danny Cummings, Ian Thomas, Glen Worf, and Richard Bennett, on the first day in the studio.

2 On *Brothers in Arms*, Fletcher played keyboards and sang background vocals. He was not yet part of the production team at that time.

3 Jeff Beck passed away at age 78 in January 2023.

4 "Going Home (Theme From Local Hero)" is available as a 12" single, on CD, and limited-edition Blu-ray, all via BMG.





edited for length and clarity.

MIKE METTLER: I understand you've got vintage, Abbey Road–approved EMI consoles and a custom Neve board installed where you record at British Grove. Is that right?

MARK KNOPFLER: Yeah. We can use any one of three or four consoles in there and bring it to bear on any recording we're doing. We could beam stuff from Studio 1 into Studio 2. We could incorporate an early EMI REDD,[5] and we could incorporate the first transistorized EMI desk, the TG. We do also have an API Legacy, which has been breathed on by British techs as well. [*chuckles.*] It is a *fantastic* desk. That's the desk Guy and I use more than any other—and we don't use any EQ either. We don't have to.

The big desk in Studio 1 is Rupert Neve's last great analog 88R, so we're spoiled. We can bring other things to the sound chain if we want to, like Neve mike-pre's. We're not short of options. In fact, Guy and I try to keep that fresh by shaking it up a bit and trying different things in the sound chain all the time. We want to avoid getting into a rut by wiring things up the same way every single time. It might be a new microphone, but it might also be a new old microphone.

I'm interested in the old working with the new—but to get them to do that, you need clever people, who can match outputs, for instance. That's important. The output from the EMI TG, the transistorized desk, will match the output of the "big Rupert," the big 88R desk in Studio 1, because it sits in the same control room as the EMI REDD from the 1960s. What's fabulous about it is that you can be using all three at once. If you wanted to incorporate, say, the compressors from the TG—and they're *fantastic* compressors—you can use them on a recording that is based around another desk. You could be doing your recording in Studio 2, but you're bringing in info from Studio 1, and then it's all together.

METTLER: That must give you great flexibility when it comes to your final mixing choices. One of the mixes I love the most on *One Deep River* is "Tunnel 13." There are a few lines near the end of it that go "Tunnel 13 is the place in the song / Where the beautiful redwood for my guitar came from," and that ties directly into the guitar you're playing. What's the difference between playing wood and playing steel? You've certainly played a lot of both all throughout your career, so is there a difference to you?

KNOPFLER: Yeah, actually, there is. You can get beautiful sounds from Dobros because of having the wood in combo with a Resonator. I've recently discovered a fantastic guitar that I got to play on *One Deep River*. It's an exceptionally well-built guitar, just a beautiful instrument, and it has both the wood and the metal in it. That guitar is called a Pete Turner Marrakech Resonator. One of the things that I really like about Pete is he doesn't go around shouting about his guitar—and he doesn't have to. It's just a wonderful-sounding instrument, and it's used on a song called "Black Tie Jobs."

METTLER: That one has the line, "I don't like the black tie jobs," or something like that.

KNOPFLER: [*laughs.*] "I hate these black tie jobs," yeah. So, that's a great guitar. And incidentally, I also used a Duesenberg guitar, which has such great character to it. They're not widely known instruments.

METTLER: They might become better known after this. I also love how you describe the Tyne[6] in the title track. It's a river you crossed many times growing up, and you've given us great visual cues without overdescribing it. Same thing with "This One's Not Going to End Well." You don't over-tell what's going on, so we get to fill in some of the blanks as we listen.

KNOPFLER: Well, maybe that's because I'm not capable of it! [*laughs heartily.*] But, yeah, I'm glad about you picking up on that.

METTLER: There's a line on your previous album,[7] "one song at a time," right? Wasn't that a phrase Chet Atkins said to you at some point?

KNOPFLER: Yep. Yeah, he did. He told me about being so poor he couldn't afford a coat to get to school in the wintertime. He said he picked his way out of poverty on the guitar, one song at a time. That's when I first heard that phrase.

METTLER: Was it your idea to have *One Deep River* mixed in Atmos?

KNOPFLER: It really wasn't. It's just that my studio, British Grove, and Guy have become kind of advanced pioneers of quality Atmos mixing. I was expecting not to be too impressed, to be honest with you. But I have to say, certainly from hearing it in British Grove, it's just been beautiful. It's like *heightened* stereo. It's a heightened awareness.

METTLER: That's the perfect phrase for it. On a track like "Watch Me Gone," your vocals are a little higher up in the soundfield in Atmos than in the stereo mix, and some of Greg Leisz's pedal-steel lines float outwards a little bit more, too, almost as if it was intended to give us a visual cue of where you guys were situated in the studio together while you were recording. Was that the intention?

KNOPFLER: Yes, that's it! In Atmos, you have a box to put your characters into. It's not like you're putting them on a flat screen—you're putting them onto a stage, or whatever you like. That's the difference in that it's not one-dimensional like a screen. You're looking into something with perspective. It's extraordinary, as long as it's in the right hands. [*chuckles.*] I'm sure a lot of people are going to do it badly, though.

METTLER: Was there one track Guy played for you in Atmos that sold it to you? Like, "Okay, I get it now—this is the thing that works for me in this format"?

KNOPFLER: Honestly, I got it straightaway because I knew that *he* got it. Guy's too clever.

At left: the Neve 88R 96-channel console in Studio 1. Right, a pair of dualing tape machines—1" on left 1/4" on right—doing what tape machines do.

5 The REDD is a tube-based mixing console designed by EMI for Abbey Road Studios.

6 The River Tyne is in North East England. The Tyne Bridge shown on the cover of *One Deep River* is located at Newcastle upon Tyne, right near where Knopfler grew up.

7 That album would be 2018's *Down the Road Wherever*.

He's not going to go and "mystify" it. He's not going to try and invest a song with things it doesn't have. So, to me, it was just a no-brainer. I just—it was wonderful. And to have it incorporated into the studio, it's even more so. In fact, there's a music-editing suite upstairs in British Grove where music goes onto film, but now there are Atmos speakers installed in Studio 2, so we can do the whole thing right there.

METTLER: That's exciting.

KNOPFLER: It *is* exciting! It really is. And, again, I didn't expect it to be. I expected it to be resolutely nonthrilling. [*MM laughs.*] I was expecting *not* to be thrilled, and I'm delighted to report that I *am* thrilled.

METTLER: Now that you're sold on it, will you have Guy go back and do your entire catalog in Atmos, including all Dire Straits albums and the entirety of your solo work? No pressure on Guy.[8] [*laughs.*]

KNOPFLER: Yeah. I mean, poor old Guy! [*chuckles.*] One thing's for sure—he's gonna have his work cut out. I've got some other things I'm thinking about, so he's going to have work to do for the next few years, or more.

METTLER: I like hearing about that, because we do have those 5.1 mixes of *Brothers in Arms* Chuck Ainlay did almost, what, 20 years ago,[9] so to get that whole album expanded into Atmos would be something else.

KNOPFLER: I know! Actually, I'm really looking forward to getting together with Chuck at some point—well, with Guy and Chuck together, and comparing where they both are with Atmos.

I'm very excited for it now because, like I said, I was so nonexcited, and then I was so excited to find myself excited! [*both laugh.*] Also, I think it can only be a good thing for the hi-fi people—the people who were stereophiles at one time who may now be getting back into it. I know what it's like to own the studio and to be in the studio where it all happens, and now I'm also hearing music in the best possible way. There's a whole other thing going on with Atmos, so I maybe have to start thinking of myself as more of an audiophile now.

METTLER: Come back on in—the audiophile waters are just fine! [*both laugh.*]

KNOPFLER: Yeah, okay! The other thing is, in my place, British Grove, you don't have to be in a sweet spot to get it. That's another beautiful thing about it. There's no one magical cubic foot that your head has to be in to get the effect. You can be in the front of the room, the back of the room, or standing at the door. It is just astonishing that way.

The room I'm talking about is a fantastic control room. Actually, [legendary producer/engineer] Glyn Johns says it's the best control room in the world. He's just a smart individual—a very smart man who knows good sound when he hears it. And he can tell a good room when he hears it, too.

Mark Knopfler's guitars

METTLER: Atmos mixes can get you further inside the music than you may have thought possible—as long as they're done the right way.

KNOPFLER: Yeah, isn't that a great thing? I hope, in a way, it's like radio at its best rather than TV just giving you a picture all the time. There's something about being able to concentrate on only the audio that heightens the experience. If you're going to make it visual as well, I don't know—you lose something that way. Being on the receiving end of where you're showing it, as well as telling it—it's just too much.

METTLER: Agreed. Another thing I have to give you and your production team credit for is that you're very good about doing double vinyl. You've also reissued your entire catalog—both the Straits material and your solo work—on upgraded vinyl, and in box-set form too. Do you get test pressings to check things out and make notes about whether something needs to change?

KNOPFLER: Absolutely! We have a great little test place at British Grove. Miles Showell, from Abbey Road, does that for us, and we don't mess around. Everyone's involved in putting the final thing together. Everybody is very interested in the process of how we arrive at choosing the actual finished product—and choosing the master is *very* important.

We've got some very experienced heads who listen for everything. Our head tech is Graham Meek, who was head tech at Decca, and we also have David Harries, who was head tech at EMI, so we've got some very, very experienced hands. And we bring along the youngsters [the studio's apprentice engineers] in their company, so they're learning from the best. And the youngsters learn how to edit tape as well as edit digital.

METTLER: I love that using tape is still important to you as an artist.

KNOPFLER: Oh, we use tape all the time. We also master three different formats of tape—quarter-, half-, and one-inch. Enjoying the different mastering mediums is part of it, and it always will be. My only talent is that I always know—I *always* know—what I want, no matter which medium. It's difficult to beat a one-inch master, but some songs will just take to the quarter-inch like a duck to water. But you have to be there to hear it, to recognize it, and to recommend it. And you have to have the respect of the mastering engineer so that he will know that you know what you are talking about. He has to understand why you've chosen the quarter-inch. There has to be a mutual respect there—and I like to think that those guys respect my judgment. ■

8 In 2022, Fletcher remixed Dire Straits' 1988 compilation album *Money for Nothing* in Atmos, which is currently available on Apple Music, and he confirmed with me directly that he's open to remixing as much of the artist's group and solo catalog in Atmos as Knopfler wants.

9 Chuck Ainlay's 5.1 mixes of *Brothers in Arms* appeared on both SACD (on Vertigo) and DVD-Audio (on Warner Bros.) in 2005 for what was termed the "20th Anniversary Edition."

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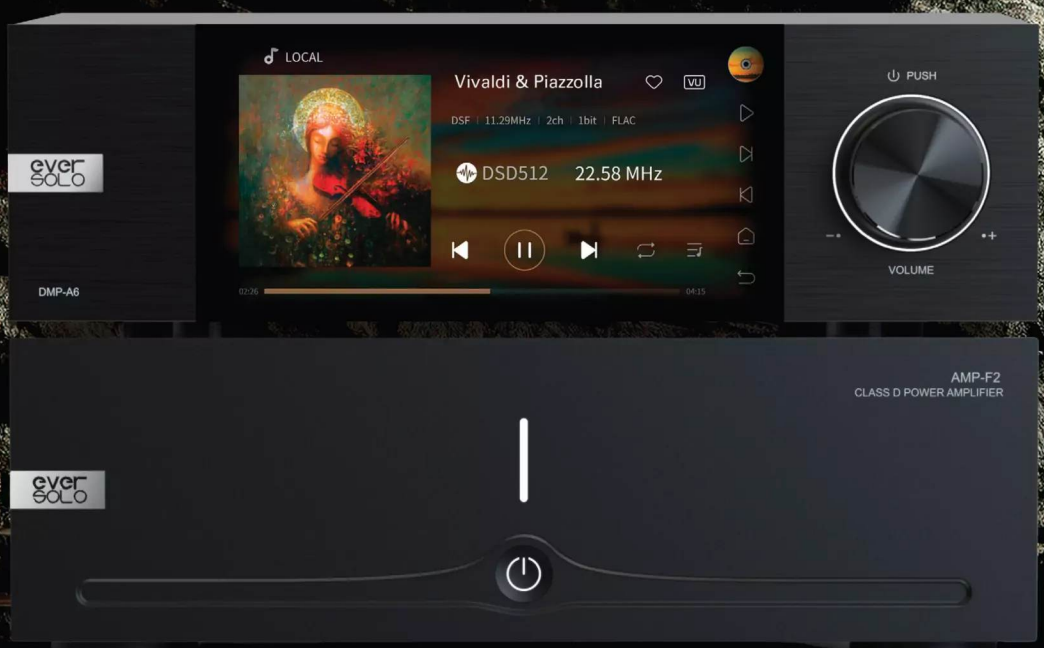

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AURAL ROBERT

BY ROBERT BAIRD

THIS ISSUE: Cosimo Matassa, J&M Recording, and a musical tour of New Orleans *circa* 2024.

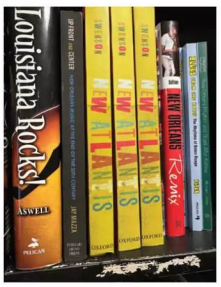
Laissez les Bon Temps Rouler

It's no secret that the musical history of New Orleans is rich and varied. From Buddy Bolden to a young Louis Armstrong being consigned to the Colored Waif's Home for shooting off his stepfather's pistol on New Year's Eve, to the many pianists who accompanied the irresistible allure of Storyville, musicians and their music have forever been a key ingredient in NOLA's flamboyant DNA. Most elemental of all—did he facilitate the birth of rock'n'roll?—are those honeyed days at Cosimo Matassa's humble but groundbreaking studio J&M Recording on Rampart Street (1947–1956). There, his infallible ears and uncanny skill placing microphones somehow imparted a raw and very real sound to early recordings of Roy Brown, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Dave Bartholomew, Ray Charles, and my personal favorite, Smiley Lewis. Such labels as Atlantic, Mercury, Aladdin, Specialty, Chess, Savoy, and Modern sent artists to The Crescent City, hoping to glean some of Matassa's elusive magic.

About his methods, Matassa, one of the seminal figures of popular recorded music, once told WWOZ radio (wwoz.org), the tenacious cheerleader of NOLA music history, that "The first thing we had was a dual Presto disc recorder. It was called a 28N—two Presto 8N recorders," Matassa said. "There was no intercutting, no tape editing. In fact, those were the good performances, probably some of the best because they were really performances as opposed to the synthesized [recordings] you make today. If you listen to the way the drums sound on the very earliest things, you can tell they were done on one microphone. ... On some of those early things, that the records sounded decent at all by today's standards is a miracle."

In Matassa's 2019 obituary on NOLA.com, the great Allen Toussaint observed, "Cosimo was the doorway and window to the world for us musicians in New Orleans. An expert, with a lot of heart and soul. When the Beatles heard Fats Domino, they heard him via Cosimo Matassa. He touched the whole world."

While New Orleans music has an unquestionably glorious past, a burning question remains: What new music there today is worth a listen? Sadly, Bourbon Street long ago devolved into an unruly, alcohol-soaked orgy of tourists and tribute bands. And given that most of the leading players from NOLA's glory years have passed, the annual New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (aka Jazz Fest) now features Vampire Weekend, the Killers, Foo Fighters, Queen Latifah, and the Rolling Stones as headliners. A recent trip to NOLA, though, confirmed yet again that the clubs on Frenchman Street continue to keep the city's musical flames burning bright.



In late April, at D.B.A. New Orleans on Frenchman Street, I saw guitarist/singer Alex McMurray, who has a voice reminiscent of another famous New Orleanian, Randy Newman. A musical fixture in the city since the late 1980s, McMurray's latest project, Tin Men, features Chaz Leary, aka Washboard Chaz, on washboard and Matt Perrine playing sousaphone. *Hit It!*, the latest release (on CD, LP, and streaming) by this eccentric ensemble—from the stage, McMurray called it "America's premier guitar, sousaphone, and washboard trio"—was well-recorded at the Nappy Dugout (after the Funkadelic song), in New Orleans, by Mike Napolitano. The album includes a sousaphone-led version of Georges Bizet's "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle," from *Carmen*, that has to be heard to be believed.

Across Frenchman Street at The Spotted Cat, in a more introspective chamber-folk vein, was the Chris Christy Quintet. The Quintet's excellent self-titled five-song EP (released on CD) has Christy—who sings and strums a metal-bodied resonator guitar—supported by baritone saxophone, standup bass, violin, and cello.

The most interesting brass band I heard was one of trombonist Charlie Halloran's many musical projects, Charlie and the Tropicales. Its new album, *Jump Up* (CD, soon to be released on vinyl), moves from Afro-Cuban dance music to a soul-styled version of Willie Nelson's "Funny How Time Slips Away" and a transcendent cover of a New Orleans gem, "Gee Baby," co-written by the late New Orleans saxophonist Alvin "Red" Tyler.

New Orleans music new and old can be had nearby at the Louisiana Music Factory (louisianamusicfactory.com) and Euclid Records (euclidrecordsneworleans.com). My tastiest acquisition on this trip was a new five-CD set, *Behind the Iron Curtain Plus...*, which documents three concerts by the great pianist James Booker, performed in the 1970s by this most talented of NOLA pianists in Switzerland, East Berlin, and Leipzig. It's a highly recommended Booker extravaganza from RWA, the label of Bear Family Founder Richard Weize. It features surprisingly clear and detailed sound.

No column on the state of New Orleans music would be complete without a mention of my dear friend and longtime *Stereophile* contributor, the late John Swenson. I was happy to see several copies of *New Atlantis*, his masterful 2011 appraisal of New Orleans music and creativity post-Katrina, for sale at Louisiana Music Factory. No one loved NOLA's musical zeitgeist more than John, whose generous spirit epitomized NOLA's unofficial motto, *laissez les bon temps rouler!* ■

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REVINYLIZATION

BY TOM FINE

THIS ISSUE: Rhino reissues the great Grateful Dead album for the second time this decade, this time straight from the analog tapes.

An *American Beauty* unblemished

Of all the albums in the Grateful Dead catalog, *American Beauty* is the one with the widest appeal. Its proto-Americana tunes are neither antique nor modern; instead, they are timeless. The album's sound is clean and lean, up to modern snuff even more than a half-century after its original release in November 1970. The tunes seem to roll like a Sunday drive on a country road, in and out of dark hollows and up and down hills.[1] Three of its 10 songs have become folk-rock standards: "Friend of the Devil," "Sugar Magnolia," and "Truckin'."

As you'd expect, the album has been reissued many times since its release; Discogs lists 116 vinyl versions,[2] though there may be some redundancy on the list. In recent times, Rhino Records has put out two very different reissues. First came the 50th Anniversary version, cut in 2020 by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering from David Glasser's Plangent-processed digital master. (A 2023 release, also from Rhino, though available only at Target, is the same as the 2020 release except that it's pressed on "limeade"-colored vinyl.) The other is the new, all-analog Rhino High Fidelity version, cut by Kevin Gray from the master tapes. It's a 5000-copy "direct from Rhino" limited edition.

The two Rhino platters sound more similar than different, indicating that the master tapes still sound good and are in playable condition. The Plangent Process, which takes place after the tape is transferred to digital, undoes time-domain distortions (flutter and wow, phase shifts) inherent to tape recording and playback. As such, it takes the sound back to something similar to what entered the tape machine's recording head. The audible result is crystal-clear transients and rock-steady imaging.

I asked Stephen Barncard, the original album's coproducer, which version he prefers. He was unequivocal. "Both versions are very good, [but] I prefer the Plangent version. Everything's tighter. The transients are in place, how it sounded when I mixed it. ... It's like going back to what I heard in the control room."

On the other hand, Gray's cut may sound more like what longtime *American Beauty* fans expect. The transients and imaging are distinct enough, but it sounds a bit distant and hazy. Its big plus is superb tonality on the harmony vocals and impressive dynamics—for *any* rock LP of any era.

As a physical artifact, the Rhino High Fidelity LP sets a high bar. The extra-heavy, high-gloss gatefold jacket is printed so finely that the faux wood on the cover image seems like real wood. Inside the gatefold is a gritty, fuzz-focused photo by Arthur Usherson of the band live onstage. The 180gm black platter, pressed at Optimal in Germany, occupies the right leaf. In the left is a four-page 12" × 12" insert that includes

images of the side A and B master tapes and an essay by musician and Grateful Dead historian David Gans.

I compared these two Rhino *American Beauty* reissues to the three streaming options on Qobuz: the 2020 Glasser/Plangent remaster, the 2013 Glasser/Plangent remaster for the digital-only HD *The Grateful Dead Complete Studio Albums Collection*, and the 2013 CD-resolution version. To my ears, Bellman did a faithful cut of Glasser's 2020 remaster, with a bit of vinyl sound added. If you favor the sound of the Plangent Process/Glasser version, and can do without an artifact, the 24/192 version is best. Both Glasser remasters sound better than the 2013 version.

Back in the vinyl world, I wanted to hear prior AAA versions. Interwebs to the rescue. There's a legendary needle-dropper out there who goes by "The Vinyl Archivist (Patrick)" and "pbthal." He has a YouTube channel. One of his videos is a "shootout" of three *AB* vinyl versions: an original Warner Bros. LP cut at Artisan Sound by Bob MacLeod, a recent-times Mobile Fidelity two-disc 45rpm version, and Bellman's 2010 cut for the box set *The Warner Bros. Studio Albums*.[3] In the descriptor text is a link to download 24/96 files of the three versions of the album's first two tracks, "Box of Rain" and "Friend of the Devil."

I was surprised how good the original Warner Bros. tracks sounded, reflecting a state-of-the-art cutting job in 1970, when the tapes were brand-new. Bellman's 2010 cut is superb, and the five-LP box set is a beautiful collectable artifact. To my ears, it's the best of all AAA versions. The MoFi sounded weird and unlike other vinyl versions: heavy in the bass and not very punchy or dynamic. In all three versions, I could hear that "pbthal" has a good-sounding vinyl playback rig and takes care of his records. While noting that his rig and mine sound a bit different, I would say Gray's new cut sounds most like the original Warner Bros. version.

So where does this leave the vinyl collector? If you can break free of the AAA mentality (which can be self-defeating, a topic for a different day), the best mainstream-priced option is the 50th Anniversary LP—either that or buy a cheap used copy so you can hold the sleeve as you stream the album in HD. The new Rhino High Fidelity vinyl is limited-edition, a fine artifact, collectable, with very good if not superb sound (that's to my ears; your mileage may vary). The 2010 box set, or the 2011 standalone LP from the same Bellman cut, are pricey on the used market but will sound great (if in great condition) and likely hold their value. An original Warner Bros. platter goes for either hefty or heftier bucks, depending on condition and which Columbia plant it was pressed at—but *damn* those needle drops sounded good. As far as genuine-authentic-real-thing, it's still the max. ■

1 Despite its deep-water calm vibe, *American Beauty* was recorded at a time of turmoil and tragedy for the band and its members; see tinyurl.com/yc7enynt and tinyurl.com/ywup93dt.

2 See tinyurl.com/yc2ues57.

3 See youtu.be/j9r8Ek0Ggfg and then check youtu.be/c_RBvSPZASI for the identities of needle drops A through C.

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REDISCOVERIES

BY TOM FINE

THIS ISSUE: A reissue on vinyl of an underappreciated West Coast album of arguably East Coast jazz.

The Fox-y West Coast bop of Harold Land

Most of the 1950s Contemporary Records catalog is the bullseye of "West Coast Jazz," a smoother, more laid-back flavor than the hard bop and soul jazz styles percolating back east. Set in that context, tenor saxman Harold Land's *The Fox* stands out for its aggressive speed and punch. Its style would seem more at home on Blue Note or Prestige.

Read the back notes on the beautifully packaged new reissue from Craft Recordings and Acoustic Sounds and clarity emerges. *The Fox* wasn't born in Contemporary's studio/shipping room. Instead, it was laid to tape at Radio Recorders, Studio B, Los Angeles, in August 1959. It was the first record produced by David Axelrod, who would become a fixture at Capitol Records. It was released by short-lived label Hifijazz.[1] Contemporary reissued it in 1969, and it has rarely been out of print since.

This latest reissue is all-analog, cut from the master tapes by Bernie Grundman. Pressed at Quality Record Pressings in Salina, Kansas, my copy arrived with quiet surfaces, crisp dynamics, and the kind of undistorted, realistic sound I expect from a Radio Recorders recording in combination with a Grundman cut. It is a rollicking, satisfying spin. How does the new reissue compare with what's out there on the streaming scene? The only streaming version I found was 16/44.1, from the old Original Jazz Classics CD. Hopefully, Grundman made an HD transfer so that Craft (part of Concord Music Group) will be able to release it to stream.

The Fox didn't include any of Contemporary Records' usual suspects (Shelly Manne, LeRoy Vinnegar, Andre Previn, Barney Kessel, and so on). Instead, it features the debut session by hot-playing trumpeter Dupree Bolton, who had no trouble keeping pace with seasoned bopper Land and pianist Elmo Hope, who was based in Los Angeles at the time, having been barred from performing in NYC for drug-related legal problems. Herbie Lewis's bass and Frank Butler's nimble drums push things along as well as the best Blue Note rhythm sections. Sadly, problems with drugs and stints in prison derailed Bolton's career; he didn't record again until 1963 on the super Curtis Amy album *Katanga!*, after spending most of the intervening time behind bars.[2] Hope died of drug-depleted bad health in 1967, aged 43. As bad as things would turn for Bolton and Hope, they played to their fullest potential on *The Fox*. Land and the rhythm section played to their usual high standard.

The album came together after Land, Hope, and Butler spent time playing in bassist Curtis Counce's band. Land and Butler played on *You Get More Bounce with Curtis Counce!*, a Contemporary album as famous for its cover as its music.[3] After hearing Bolton play in a Los Angeles club, Land enlisted him for the album.

In Radio Recorders' Studio B, the group laid down six tracks, four written by Hope and two by Land: the title cut and "Little Chris," named for his then-young son Harold Christopher Land, now a jazz pianist who played in Gerald Wilson's band and is still active in the L.A. scene. The title track is 12-bar blues on speed, requiring extra-strength chops to enunciate the breakneck note flow. It's akin to the typical Brown and Roach opener (Land played in their quintet), and this group runs through it like Olympic sprinters.

In the 1969 liner notes, Land told Leonard Feather, "Elmo was equally talented as a soloist and composer, but with a difference. He expresses things in his writing you don't hear in his playing. ... Elmo truly had a touch of genius. I was in awe of him." Hope's tunes on *The Fox* range from the fast and popping "Sims A-Plenty" (propelled by Butler's excellent stick work) to the moody "Mirror-Mind Rose." The latter recalls a rainy night in a film noir setting. The side A closer, "One Second, Please," is another bopper with Land's legato playing nicely contrasted by Butler's pecking beats. The album closer, "One Down," has a Latin flavor to the beat and a skeletal chord structure laid down by Hope, with wide latitude for Bolton and Land to settle in and blow extended solos. Hope's solo in the middle is in jagged contrast to the shuffling rhythm behind it.

At the time of the recording, Land was an established tenor player with a solid resume of recordings. He probably would have been a jazz star in New York, but he chose to settle in L.A. in 1955 after leaving the Brown–Roach band to attend to family matters. Before he left, Land was a great counterpoint to Brown's trumpet and wasn't fazed by the quick turns and breakneck runs common to the group. He played on all but the band's final album. His replacement, Sonny Rollins, handled the sax duties on *Clifford Brown and Max Roach at Basin Street*, a studio recording despite the title.

Land remained L.A.-based for the rest of his life. His recording debut as leader was for Contemporary, in 1958. After *The Fox*, he made records for Riverside/Jazzland, Blue Note, Atlantic, Chess/Cadet, Concord, and other labels. In the 1960s, he transitioned from a Charlie Parker–based bebop sensibility toward John Coltrane's style, always with his own voice. He was a professor in the UCLA Jazz Studios program, joining in 1966 at the behest of director Kenny Burrell. He died of a stroke in 2001, age 72.[4]

Summing up *The Fox*, Land told Feather, "The session has always loomed large in my mind as an important event." ■

1 See tinyurl.com/mrnujcx5.

2 *Katanga!* was discussed in Analog Corner #315 in 2021. bit.ly/SPKatanga.

3 See tinyurl.com/mj49akkj.

4 The *New York Times* obit is at tinyurl.com/zz8ddz5y.

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RABBIT HOLES

BY ANDREY HENKIN

THIS ISSUE: Soul Music Records releases 107 tracks on 8 CDs from the artist formerly known as Eunice Waymon.

Nina on Colpix

Seventy years ago this summer, a young pianist from Tryon, North Carolina—a town of fewer than 2000 residents—made her professional debut in Atlantic City. This was not the culmination of a dream but rather an economic choice born of the racial circumstances of the era. It was a letdown.

The venue was the Midtown Bar. If they'd known what she was doing, her parents would have objected and her musical peers would have sneered, so Eunice Waymon performed under a pseudonym: Nina Simone. Adding to the indignity for this classically trained pianist, playing wasn't enough; she was also expected to *sing*.

Simone would continue in Atlantic City for almost two years, then do similar work in Philadelphia, where her family had relocated in 1951 in expectation of her being accepted into the prestigious Curtis School of Music. (She wasn't.) Eventually, this work would pay off in the form of a debut album, *Little Girl Blue*, for Bethlehem Records, recorded in 1957. But even this would be a disappointment, as the label had financial problems and the release would not come until 1959 and then be underpromoted. The album's "I Loves You Porgy" would become Bethlehem's biggest hit. But before the album came out, Simone had signed a contract with a different label, Colpix.

Soul Music Records has just released *Blackbird – The Colpix Recordings*, the first comprehensive reissue of the music Simone made for the label between Aprils 1959 and 1963. Some of this music has been released before—often in sketchy, unauthorized form—but here are the eight complete albums filled out with singles and radio edits. (Left off the set are two compilation albums Colpix put out after Simone decamped to Philips, including one in which strings were added after the fact to what had been a small-group session.) The 107-track, 8-CD set was remastered by the esteemed Nick Robbins. The package includes essays from Simone's archivist, the librettist of the opera *Nina Simone's Absurde*, and the founder of the UK Appreciation Society for Nina Simone.

If Colpix is unfamiliar to you, don't feel bad. The label existed for less than a decade, from 1958 through 1966. Oddly, it was a subsidiary of Columbia Pictures; much of its catalogue was film and TV soundtracks. Otherwise, its releases were random pop and proto-rock acts, novelty dates with the voice actors for Yogi Bear and Huckleberry Hound, comedy recordings, and occasional one-off jazz sessions: Art Blakey, Chris Barber, Randy Weston, Zoot Sims.

Simone, the label's signature artist, developed at a startling rate, from the revue-like quality of her debut, *The Amazing Nina Simone*, to holding an audience rapt at a concert that would yield two albums—*Nina Simone at Carnegie Hall* and *Folksy Nina*—with music including originals, movie-theme instruments, and folk music. In between came live albums from New York's Town Hall, The Village Gate, and the Newport Jazz Festival, and studio dates covering a huge range including a whole album of music composed or performed by Duke Ellington.

Auditioning this set as a whole provides a new appreciation of Simone as a pianist, particularly the numerous instrumental pieces; though she is now known as a singing pianist, or as a vocalist who played, she had the talent and touch for a successful concertizing career if circumstances had allowed. An unexpected bonus is hearing so much from guitarist Alvin Schackman, who appears on half the set and whose work with Simone predated her recording debut and continued through 2000.

The live sets capture her power better than the studio sessions do, but the latter are notable for the first appearance in her catalogue of Nat Adderley and Oscar Brown, Jr.'s "Work Song," on *Forbidden Fruit*, and the solo-piano-plus-vocal readings of "Hey, Buddy Bolden" and "Satin Doll" on the Ellington album.

On *Town Hall*, she mesmerizes with solo renditions of "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair" and the original instrumentals "Under the Lowest" and "Return Home." *Newport*'s highlights are Cole Porter's "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To," on which Simone sings only during the last two minutes, and the driving, percussion-heavy original "Flo Me La."

Nina at The Village Gate is the gem of the collection, the first glimpses of the power Simone could muster, particularly the material originally on side B: Oscar Brown, Jr.'s "Brown Baby," Babatunde Olatunji's "Zungo" (presumably brought to Simone by Schackman, who was concurrently working with the Nigerian percussionist), and the spirituals "If He Changed My Name" and "Children Go Where I Send You." The latter has Simone asking the crowd, "You ever been in a revival meeting? I bet you don't even know what I'm talking about. Well, you in one right now." For the Carnegie Hall show, her solo debut there following a shared 1961 date with Miriam Makeba, instrumentals like "Theme from Samson and Delilah" and "Theme from Sayonara" share space with a beautiful medley of "The Other Woman/Cotton Eyed Joe," two Jewish folk pieces, a gorgeous solo-piano-and-vocal "Lass of the Low Country," and a 10+-minute "Work Song" that must have rocked the normally staid hall.

Five months after that triumphant Carnegie Hall concert, four Black girls in Birmingham, Alabama, were murdered at church by Ku Klux Klan members. All the frustration and righteous anger Simone had experienced in her 30 years broke the dam. That tragedy and myriad other instances of racially motivated violence and oppression led her to write the song "Mississippi Goddam" (released as a single as "Mississippi *%??**&%), the closing track of *In Concert* on Philips, her first album after leaving Colpix and one of the songs for which she would be best known. Eunice Waymon found a new calling as Nina Simone, joining the lineage of Billie Holiday and Abbey Lincoln, lifting her voice not just to sing but in protest. ■

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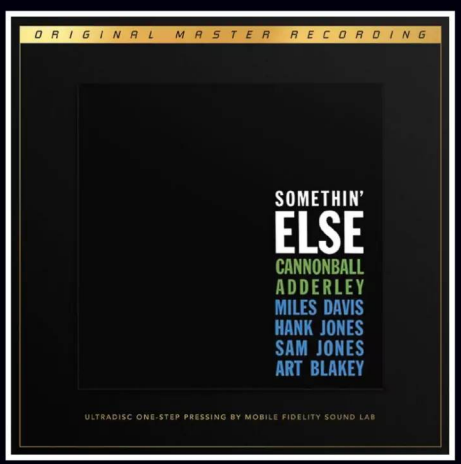
RECORD REVIEWS

EDITOR'S PICK

RECORDING OF THE MONTH



SOMETHIN' ELSE

Julian "Cannonball" Adderley (alto saxophone), Miles Davis (trumpet), Hank Jones (piano), Sam Jones (bass), Art Blakey (drums)

Mobile Fidelity UD15 2-022 (2 45rpm "Ultradisc One-Step" LPs). 2024. Alfred Lion, prod.; Rudy Van Gelder, eng.; Krieg Wunderlich, Shawn R. Britton, mastering engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

For those who care about sonics, the current wave of expensive 45rpm vinyl reissues has made one question urgently relevant: Does convenience trump better sound? Put differently, does the ease of not getting up every 10 minutes to turn over or replace the record offset improved sound quality?

It's settled science that a higher rotational speed can result in a better frequency range, better stereo imaging, less frequency fluctuation, and increased low-end response—*if* a record is well-pressed. Vinyl cut at 45rpm has a 36% higher groove velocity. The inner tracks in particular on a 12", 45rpm cut should sound noticeably better.

The downside is that the amount of recorded time is now also reduced by 36%, which means the records must be flipped sooner and more frequently, breaking up the continuity of a performance. This is why vinyl cut at the faster speed is especially problematic for classical music: The performance never gains any real momentum. In rock music, the careful sequencing of tracks on albums to tell a cogent story, an esoteric skill that rose to the level of an artform by the late '70s, can also be wrecked by a faster cut.

I pondered all this while listening to the new Mobile Fidelity "Ultradisc One-Step" 45rpm cut of Julian "Cannonball" Adderley's timeless *Somethin' Else*. These LPs are cut on a premium vinyl formulation in a process that skips two generations. MoFi's recordings are not all-analog, since they involve a high-resolution DSD step.

For comparison, I listened to the 2015 160gm, 33 $^{1}/_{3}$rpm direct metal master reissue on Blue Note, the 2014 180gm, 33 1/3rpm reissue by Music Matters, a 2008 200gm, 45rpm version from Analogue Productions, and the 24/96 stream of a 2012 remaster. All the vinyl had Rudy Van Gelder's usual sound, bright but clear and dynamic. The DMM version was punchier than the others, as is so often the case with DMM. The differences between the Analogue Productions and Music Matters reissues are minor. The Mobile Fidelity version offers a bit more air in the soundstage and a bit more radiance in the high frequencies: more edge to the horns and more exact detail on the cymbals.

North Florida native Adderley, whose nickname came from "cannibal" after his prodigious appetites, moved to New York in 1955. He joined Miles Davis's group two years later, eventually playing on *Milestones* (1958) and *Kind of Blue* (1959). Soon after joining Davis—on March 9, 1958—Adderley convinced the shapeshifting trumpeter to play sideman at the recording date that would become *Somethin' Else*; the saxophonist was billed as leader. Produced by Blue Note founder Alfred Lion, it was captured by Van Gelder at his studio in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Only five tracks long (plus bonus track, "Bangoon (aka Alison's Uncle)," added here), it was Adderley's only recording session for Blue Note. It is also one of the few appearances by Davis on a Blue Note album, recorded at a time when the star trumpeter was curtailing his sideman gigs.

It is tempting to say that Miles, with his succinct solos and instantly recognizable muted tone, steals this show, but the reality is more complex and collaborative. In the opener, "Autumn Leaves," Adderley's fertile ideas flow naturally, communicating his range and improvisational gifts in a rich, warm tone. Just as responsible for the success of *Somethin' Else* is the nonpareil rhythm section: pianist Hank Jones, bassist Sam Jones, and drummer Art Blakey. Sam provides the anchoring presence behind Adderley's gorgeous soloing on Cole Porter's "Love for Sale." The matchless Blakey, while in the background much of the time, is the rock upon which the entire session confidently rests.

The heart of this album has always been the midtempo title track, which showcases Adderley and Davis alternating solos; these are among the best moments ever on record from either player. "One for Daddy-O," a sprightly blues number written by Julian's trumpet-playing brother Nat, leads off with Cannonball showing his affinity for exuberant blues performances, a quality he'd amplify during his '70s turn to soul jazz. Miles counters with his own soaring journey through his horn's upper ranges. The perennially underrated Hank Jones has his say. According to Leonard Feather's original liner notes, which are included in the MoFi release on a one-page insert, Miles "made" Cannonball play the final track, "Dancing in the Dark," with legato lines because Davis liked the way he'd heard singer Sarah Vaughan do it.

Timing can be everything, in both life and recording, and on *Somethin' Else*, it's clear that genius aligned. This creative convergence will forever remain breathtaking. As for which speed sounds best, there's no debate: Vinyl cut at 45rpm definitely sounds better, but it's more work. To go colloquial, I tend to agree with a post on one of the audio-focused forums: "Like cars and women, the faster the better."—**Robert Baird** ■

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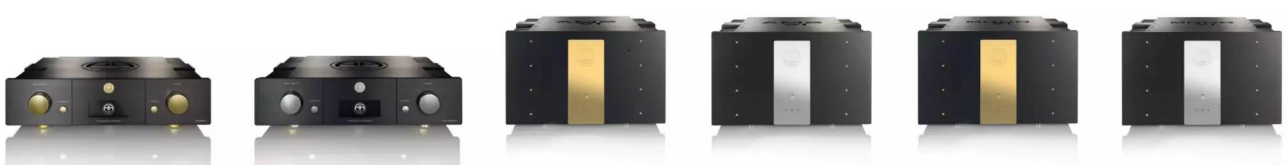


JAZZ

LIZZ WRIGHT
Shadow

Wright, vocals; many others

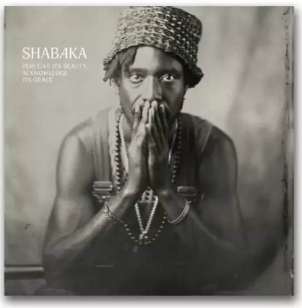
Blues & Greens 00810069450872 (CD, available as LP). 2024. Chris Bruce, prod.; Ryan Freeland, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

Lizz Wright's new album recalls the good old days when successful jazz labels bankrolled ambitious projects for big-time singers. *Shadow* has classy packaging, a large cast of musicians, an established producer, a well-known photographer, fashion designers, and famous guests like Angelique Kidjo and Meshell Ndegeocello. But it is 2024, so Wright had to do all that herself. *Shadow* is the second release on her own label, Blues & Greens.

Wright has never quite achieved major status as a jazz singer. But, over 20 years, she has compiled a respected discography on the Verve and Concord labels. If, like your present correspondent, you have slept through Wright, when you hear the first track here—her original "Sparrow"—you will wonder how you missed her. Her vocal instrument instantly commands attention with its richness and clarity. Her voice conveys a sense of enormous power in reserve, yet it also contains an intimate, dignified revelation of vulnerability.

Wright says *Shadow* is the album she always wanted to make. Free of the influence of record companies and A&R people, who tend to prefer genre specificity, she incorporates Americana into her jazz. She sings pieces by Caitlin Canty, Gillian Welch, and Toshi Reagon, with spare arrangements (despite all the available players) centered on acoustic guitar. When performed by their composers, the plaintive, slightly nasal country voices of Canty and Welch make songs like "Lost in the Valley" and "I Made a Lover's Prayer" into deep but narrow slices of life. When Wright sings them, her extraordinary voice enlarges them and renders them universal. Wright's version of Sandy Denny's "Who Knows Where the Time Goes" may be that song's most profound interpretation. Her "I Concentrate on You" makes most Cole Porter covers sound inconsequential.—**Thomas Conrad**



SHABAKA HUTCHINGS
Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace

Impulse! 00602465043112. 2024. Hutchings, Dilip Harris, prods.; Dilip Harris, Guy Davie, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

Sons of Kemet were a UK jazz band with a muscular vitality and freshness. They built a sizable, dedicated following. Many were disappointed when founding member Shabaka Hutchings announced that they would disband. That turned to surprise at the news that he would also give up his primary instrument, saxophone, to take up flute.

Nor would many have expected him to embark on a path as new as this, his first solo album. Sonically it floats along, elegant and delicate, its ambience traveling on the winds of influences from across continents: African rhythms and poetry, the complexity of Middle Eastern textures, Western electronica. Sometimes instrumental, sometimes with spoken word, sometimes with guest vocalists, this set of songs blends together to create a near-transcendental experience.

Rising higher in the mix, often, is one of his many, varied flutes, or Charles Overton's harp, or Euclid's or Lianne La Havas's vocals, or any of 25 musicians. The musician list is big, the impact is big, but this is no big-band sound; it's small-group jazz with many players. It never sounds cluttered. Indeed, there is space between the notes, between the tones and textures, reminiscent of the sense of freedom which South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim achieves—and that is crucial to the album's great success. This is music to meditate to, to submerge yourself in, as in a deep, warm crystal-pure pool, or to allow to massage your mind. Sons of Kemet were known for energetic, blistering sets; with this album, Shabaka slows the pace and takes time to draw breath. Yet there's a new energy and strength. Miles Davis said to be creative you have to change. Shabaka did and has. The album's title perfectly encapsulates this. Although an alternative one could have been Simply Sublime.—**Phil Brett**

JULIEN KNOWLES
As Many, as One

Knowles, trumpet; Devin Daniels, alto saxophone; Javier Santiago, piano; Dario Bizio, bass; Benjamin Ring, drums; string quartet (three tracks)
Biophilia BREP0030 (24/96 download). 2024. Knowles, Adam Benjamin, prods.; Stuart Schenk, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

There are several ways to think about this album. First, its exhilarating, fresh creativity is further proof of the vitality of today's jazz art. Second, it is additional documentation of the recent explosion of the Los Angeles jazz scene. Third, it is an example of the growing importance of stringed instruments in jazz. Fourth, it represents a new jazz genre. Call it "contemporary avant-garde."

As Many, as One, on the digital-only Biophilia label, is the debut recording of L.A.-based trumpeter/composer Julien Knowles. He leads a young quintet, which executes his edgy, complex, asymmetrical music as if they don't know it's hard. "Desire Path," for example, is fervent with energy yet sounds focused and purposeful. Knowles, alto saxophonist Devin Daniels, and pianist Javier Santiago take remarkable solos in the moment that become inseparable from Knowles's preconceived ensemble design. (Daniels, Santiago, and drummer Benjamin Ring were classmates of Knowles's at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz at UCLA. Daniels recently joined Hancock's band.)

Knowles's writing for strings is distinctive. He uses them three ways. "Opening" is a one-minute microcosm; Knowles's trumpet makes a single dramatic sweep over a lush smear of violins. "End of the Night" is a ballad by L.A. artist Louis Cole; strings quietly cry beneath rapt contemplations by Knowles, Javier, and Knowles again. The centerpiece of the album is "Moon Theater," a river of sound that for more than nine minutes flows into diverse branches and sometimes circles back on itself; the notated parts for the strings are so alive they could almost be real-time responses to the inspired improvisations of Knowles, Santiago, and bassist Dario Bizio.

—**Thomas Conrad**

JAZZ

KJ DENHERT
The Evening News

Denhert, vocals, guitar; Nicki Denner, piano; Mark McInyre, guitar; Adam Armstrong, bass; Eric Halvorson, drums

Mother Cyclone (no number) (CD). 2024. Denhert, Armstrong, prods.; Dave Stoller, Chris Sulit, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

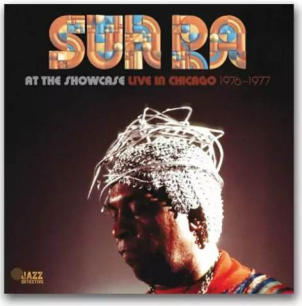
KJ Denhert is difficult to classify, which may partly explain why she is not more famous. She has been many places in her 40-year career but will always be associated with two: the 55 Bar in New York, where she was a fixture for 23 years (until the pandemic shut it down), and the Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, Italy. For years, she played every day of the 10-day Umbria festival on one of its free stages, often outclassing acts that played the 5000-seat arena, where tickets cost many euros.

Denhert sings and accompanies herself (skillfully) on guitar. She acknowledges the influence of singer/songwriters like James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, but Denhert has more jazz feeling. What she does might be called "urban folk-jazz."

The Evening News is the name of her new, lithe, tight band and also of her 11th album. It has four new songs. "Esmerelda" has the kind of hook that sets itself deep. Also deep-seated is Denhert's heartfelt memory of a friend who came to her rescue long ago, when she was "just short of 19." "Postcard from Paris" is another touching retrospective love song, this time for her late mother.

She has always sung standards. "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" may seem an improbable choice. But Denhert, with her smoky, streetwise voice, can make any good song freshly relevant. The same can be said of The Evening News as a band. They give Rodgers and Hammerstein a snaky, insinuating new groove.

But Denhert's calling card is the expressive power of her voice. Its humanity and authenticity are so undeniable that you always believe her, whether she sings about surreys or long-lost friends or parents, or even when she sings a Beatles song you have heard 1000 times. "Eleanor Rigby" never sounded more lonely.—**Thomas Conrad**



SUN RA
At the Showcase: Live in Chicago 1976-1977

Sun Ra, piano, electric keyboards; John Gilmore, tenor sax; Marshall Allen, alto sax, flute, kora; many others

Jazz Detective DDJD-013 (2CD). 1976, 1977/2024. Zev Feldman, Michael D. Anderson, prods.; Richard Wilkerson, Joe Lizzi, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Sun Ra boasts a huge discography, yet this posthumous addition is welcome. It captures a pair of rip-roaring club sessions from one of Ra's peak periods, and its palpable audio presence is a far cry from many lo-fi live recordings, including one from the same period and venue, available online.

The first disc, recorded in 1977, presents Ra in a relatively conventional vein; consider his ragged, rowdy, yet respectful treatment of "Rose Room," the only non-original composition on either disc. Other tunes have a soul-jazz feel, such as "Synthesis Approach," where John Gilmore's gritty tenor sax wails bluesily over Ra's organ, or "Ankhnaton," where the band riffs propulsively behind a squalling trumpet. Others are abstract, such as "View from Another Dimension," where horns honk and screech their way into a state of inspired chaos.

The second disc, recorded the previous year, has a more cacophonous feel. On the opening track, "Calling Planet Earth & the Shadow World," Ra's spaced-out synthesizer seems to speak in an extraterrestrial language before the band erupts into structured pandemonium and Marshall Allen delivers a squawking, squealing alto sax solo over furious percussion. On "Ebah Speaks in Cosmic Tongue," Akh Tal Ebah does just that in a striking display of spoken glossolalia. Another three numbers are sung by band members, including Ra's signature anthem "Space Is the Place," during which the volume lowers as the musicians leave the stage and march around the club.

What I best remember from my own Showcase attendance are Ra's hypnotic keyboard solos. Here, these are given less emphasis than the ensemble work. Nonetheless, the collection makes a sterling impression.—**Larry Birnbaum**

ROCK/POP

OHIO PLAYERS
Pleasure

Westbound Records (auditioned as LP). 2023. Ohio Players, Andrew Rossiter, Rich Hansen, prods.; Arlen Smith, Howard Craft, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

After Motown left Detroit, Westbound Records stepped in to prove that great sounds were still coming from the city. The Ohio Players helped anchor the roster.

Starting out as a backup to the O'Jays, the Ohio Players soon created their own musical identity, rooted in deep grooves. *Pleasure*, from 1973, reflects what the band did best. The album's influence has lasted more than 50 years; "Funky Worm" has been sampled by N.W.A., Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, Redman, De La Soul, Kendrick Lamar, Nipsey Hussle, Beastie Boys, DMX, and countless others.

Following a decade-long process of rescuing, preserving, and restoring Westbound's original master tapes, *Pleasure*, alongside other groundbreaking recordings, has been remastered. The original record from 1972 was heralded for the balance it struck between radio-friendly songs, jazz leanings, and all-out jams. With so much going on, finding a sonic center was always the challenge; the original release found its center in a more muted, less vivid place. This remaster is a bit brighter and sound separation is much better defined. This helps heighten the voice, showcasing the vocal capabilities and harmonies the band never received proper credit for. To that point: While the band was not known for its ballads, "Varee is Love" is an enticing departure from the same old funk and a great demonstration of the group's range. The sound of the reissue has greater depth.

The Ohio Players were originally from Dayton, but this record could be a metaphor for their adopted city of Detroit. It's gritty, at times grimy. It's got something to prove. But it also has great lines, technical innovation, and tons of horsepower. There's a lot going on under *Pleasure*'s hood, and this remaster lets the engine roar better than it did before.—**Ray Chelstowski**

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ROCK/POP

THE BLACK KEYS
Ohio Players

Nonesuch Records (auditioned as LP). 2024. The Black Keys, Daniel Nakamura, prods.; M. Allen Parker, Greg Kurstin, others, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

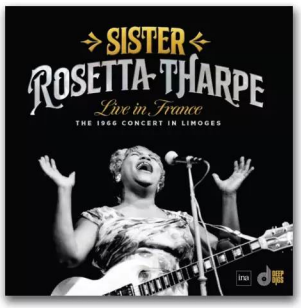
When the Black Keys released the album *El Camino* in 2011, many longtime fans feared the indie act had gone mainstream. Thirteen years later, their new record, *Ohio Players*, won't convince those fans that they were wrong.

Instead of music rooted in garage rock and blues, this record moves the focus from the garage to a groove reminiscent of the band named in the album title, with dance-hall rhythm parts, broad harmonies, and polished production. Credit a good amount of that to Beck Hansen, who co-wrote half the songs, and a technical staff twice as large as any they've previously used.

There's a lot of songs on this record—14 of them—but most tracks have runtimes just over two minutes. In that short span, they deliver tremendous energy and occupy a vast sonic space. The songs unfurl with a 1960s underground "Go Go" vibe, delivering tons of soul alongside hazy psychedelic elements. Much of what you hear feels a bit out of reach, and that creates an atmosphere that feels like it could live in a Tarantino-directed James Bond soundtrack. It's fun!

Side A, which is more approachable, less cluttered, and better thought through than side B, closes with a brilliant cover of the William Bell song "I Forgot to Be Your Lover." After that the ride seems shakier, as if Dan Auerbach and Patrick Carney, both notorious studio rats, should have stepped outside and grabbed some air to help keep things fresh.

As they did for 2022's *Dropout Boogie*, the duo recruited a guitar ace: Noel Gallagher, who co-wrote the single "On the Game." That song may be where the group strikes the best balance between the rockers they were and the artists they are apparently becoming. The song has majesty alongside gritty hints of what has always made this group great.—**Ray Chelstowski**



SISTER ROSETTA THARPE
Live in France: The 1966 Concert in Limoges

Deep Digs (auditioned as CD). 2024. Zev Feldman, exec. prod.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

Live From the Harlem Square Club introduced the world to an artist they didn't know existed. There, Sam Cooke performed in a small room attended by a "club audience." His approach was stripped down and direct, in opposition to *Live at the Copa*, which was released at the same time. On that album, Sam was the polished crooner, backed by an orchestra and quick with midsong banter. Not here.

Singers like Sam struggled in America, but in Europe, especially Paris, they were welcomed. The only condition was that the music had to be good; if it was, crowds followed. The town gave Rosetta Tharpe plenty of attention.

Celebrated by audiences across Europe, Tharpe toured the continent relentlessly in the 1960s. Her '66 performance in Limoges was her third concert there. It was captured on tape that night by the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française, and now it makes its debut. The result is more an experience than an album. The live exchange between artist and audience is communal, and the set of songs, largely spiritual, are filled with conviction and an allowable sense of preaching.

Tharpe, known as "The Godmother of Rock'n'Roll," approaches this music and the crowd with a professionalism that respects the setting but also an authenticity that's moving. It's difficult to explain why this recording hasn't surfaced before; whatever the reason, its arrival is best celebrated through the powerful performances found in songs like "Moonshine" and "Bring Back Those Happy Days." The majesty of her music, the elegance of that room, and the power of her voice will make you shake.

Tharpe's live talents would inspire generations of American artists, right down to Ruthie Foster and Brittany Howard, but her influence, as demonstrated here, was global.—**Ray Chelstowski**

LITTLE FEAT
Sam's Place

Hot Tomato Productions (auditioned as CD). 2024. Little Feat, Charles A. Martinez, prods.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

It has been 12 years since the last time Little Feat went into the studio to make a new record. The passing five years ago of longtime member guitarist Paul Barrere caused Feat fans to worry that the band might never make another record of original music—that an ensemble that always embraced change might become a fixed museum display.

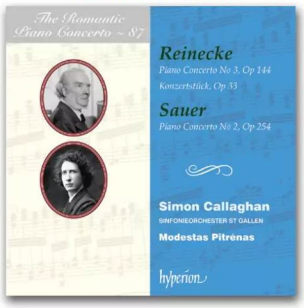
Sam's Place is welcome not only for its inherent sense of fun but for ensuring that the band has much more to offer. Percussionist Sam Clayton, who has always added sonic spice and clever accents to the band's comedic sense, steps forward and provides lead vocal on a blues-based record that never loses its "Feat."

Running through a collection of classics—mostly from Willie Dixon and Muddy Waters—the band sounds sharper than ever. New members Scott Sharrard on guitar and Tony Leone on drums bring energy and power to each track; this version of the band can remain crisp across their whole catalog, in any setting. Sharrard, who has worked with Gregg Allman, delivers slide parts that melt in ways that grab your ear.

Bonnie Raitt, who at this point is practically an adjunct band member, appears on "Long Distance Call" and reminds us of how perfectly she has sat within the sounds that this band has made since 1969. The balance of her vocals with Clayton's is natural; her track shows how this band known for playing big can unite genres and soar when things get intimate.

Charles A. Martinez told me that the album was recorded on a Spectra Sonics 1020 console that's older than the band. It was in the Stax Records museum when Sam Phillips Recording rescued it to put it in use in their studio, where Sam's Place was recorded. The result is a record for today made through a throw-back process, with good people, good equipment, and a good room.—**Ray Chelstowski**

CLASSICAL



REINECKE
Piano Concerto No.3; Konzertstück
SAUER
Piano Concerto No.2

Simon Callaghan, piano;
St. Gallen Symphony/Modestas Pitrėnas

Hyperion CDA 68429 (CD, 2024). Jeremy Hayes, prod.; Ben Connellan, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Carl Reinecke's early-Romantic idiom falls easy on the ear, bringing echoes of familiar composers. His bittersweet lyricism and scampering piano writing echo Mendelssohn with a hint of Liszt in the cadenza's cascading thirds. The piano writing is idiomatic and fluent.

The piano begins with an unaccompanied chorale, which the strings pick up and round off. A triumphant *tutti* arrives; the piano continues rhapsodically. The development becomes turbulent, the orchestra begins, the piano dovetails with it. A rousing finish preceeds a quiet afterthought. In the central *Largo*, the piano embellishes a string-based chorale with increasing elaboration. In the *Finale,* the piano's rippling theme leads to a hearty orchestral swing.

The *Konzertstück* is effectively a scaled-down concerto. Its variety of materials—agitated, playful, lyrical, sprightly—risk sounding schizzy, but an internal logic prevails.

The Sauer begins exotically, with Eastern-inflected English-horn and oboe soli over strings. A piano arpeggio rises from resonant bass depths. The second theme sounds vaguely Celtic, but then the piano's midrange chords turn it thumpy. Demonstrative gestures—note the bracing tremolos—are too easily rhetorical.

Callaghan's sparkling, articulate runs in Sauer's scherzo repeatedly catch the breath. His playing throughout is masterful. The St. Gallen orchestra plays stylishly, though fuller passages thicken. Conductor Pitrėnas ensures we can hear lead lines in the reeds, drawing a warm carpet of strings in Sauer's *Andante*. Reinecke's unison horns cut through. The piano's topmost notes harden; it sounds like the instrument's problem.—**Stephen Francis Vasta**

TCHAIKOVSKY
Symphonies 4-6

Recursive Classics RC4789671 (24/96 WAV). Jennifer Nulsen, prod.; Mie Hirschfield, Joel Watts, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★½
SONICS ★★★★★

As in this group's previous release of the Mahler Fifth, the engineering is refreshingly clean and gimmick-free. The brasses that launch the Fourth have solid presence and depth. The oboe that begins the slow movement emerges startlingly from utter silence. Woodwind chords register with color and texture; the buzzing contrabassoon occasionally cuts through.

Bernard's instincts are excellent; he gets the best out of his high-end volunteers. Well-intentioned ritards can hobble a secondary motif, and impulsive surges may fly in all directions. The playing is best where rhythmic patterns stay regular; the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies come off well.

In the Pathétique's first movement, the two themes build steadily and expressively; the development is excellent; the recap sustains a nice intensity. The second movement "waltz" lilts gracefully, but the horns' supporting parts are rough. The March is first-class. The *finale* unfolds steadily until the runup introduces a distracting push-and-pull. The final pages ooze.

I liked the Fourth's forthright start and the first theme's undulating syncopations, but the exposition climax isn't the expected avalanche of sound. The *Andantino*'s recap is poised, the *Scherzo* energetic rather than feathery, though its return is properly light. The Finale's runs are played as the composer indicated, split between strings and winds, but the final run's a blur.

In the Fifth, I liked Bernard's straightforward introduction and first subject—but why the recurring ritards in the third theme? The Andante's horn solo is smooth and expressive, but the pointillist motifs that dot the score are less secure. Intricate textures get skittish and untidy. There's brief chaos before the *finale*'s return of the motto theme.

Despite higher-octave competition, this merits legitimate consideration for its exceptional reproduction.—**Stephen Francis Vasta**

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BY JULIE MULLINS

THIS ISSUE: Mark Mawhinney owns and operates three related retail businesses, all under the same roof. For Mark, everyone is a potential customer.

Music to our ears

It's a truism in business—or if it isn't strictly true, it's at least a cliché—that you can't please everyone. But Mark Mawhinney sees everyone as a potential customer. He does his best to cover all customer bases, from old-school audiophiles to newcomers, from Boomers to Gen Z. "As long as they have two legs and two ears, they can be our customers," he told *Stereophile* in a recent phone interview.

Mawhinney owns and runs three businesses: Spin-Clean, the longstanding, inexpensive record-cleaning system; Northern Audio, a high-end audio dealership; and Music To My Ear, a record store that also sells some entry-level to midtier hi-fi equipment. The three businesses occupy the same building in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Business, he says, is strong.

Not many people can claim 50 years of industry experience—especially at age 60. Mawhinney traces his experience back to age 10, when he worked with his father, who invented Spin-Clean and built a very successful business with it. His father also owned Record-Rama, a record store that was said to have had one of the largest vinyl collections in the country if not the world.

Mawhinney opened his record store, Music To My Ear, about 12 years ago and moved it into its current location eight years ago. In addition to records, the store stocks entry-to-midlevel products from Rega, Cambridge Audio, MoFi, Andover Audio, and Music Hall, among others. And of course, they carry Spin-Clean, which has been around for 50-plus years but received some upgrades last year. Pre-owned records get the Spin-Clean treatment.

Having all three businesses in the same building is a big advantage, Mawhinney said. There's synergy. People who show up to buy records can get their first glimpse into how much better their music could sound through better quality equipment. They might start upgrading without leaving the store. Customers at Northern Audio might stop by on their way out to shop for vinyl. Those who outgrow their Spin-Clean can buy an Audiodesksysteme or a Klaudio. Then on their way out, they can buy some new records to clean and play.

Records get most first-time customers in the door. As I write this in late April, Record Store Day is still visible in the rearview mirror. "It was a bit crazy here," Mawhinney said. In fact, it was the biggest day in the history of Music To My Ear. They had more than 400 customers in one day, and 40–50 slept outside from midnight the night before.

"It's such a wide variety of age groups," Mawhinney said about his customers who are into vinyl. As much as half his business at Music To My Ear is from Gen Z. Some of them don't own a turntable—yet. They buy records to support their favorite artists, he said.

Most young customers—"the kids," he calls them—might spend $150–$200 on a first turntable and about $400 on average on a whole first system. Another customer may invest around $15,000 in a Luxman turntable. "We can do that, too," he said. "Most stores don't have the ability to be multifaceted like that."

"You want those kids to grow up with the knowledge that better things exist out there in terms of better ways to listen to the music they enjoy." He hopes that in the future, when they have a career and more buying power, they'll graduate to Northern Audio.

Mawhinney himself has been on his own hi-fi journey. He has been involved in hi-fi retail for decades. He worked at a Listening Post location in Pittsburgh "on and off for 10 to 12 years," he said; he left in his mid-20s and opened Northern Audio Exchange, a tiny, split-level store where he sold audio gear on consignment. Eventually, he began stocking new products. The business expanded into home theater, evolved, and 33 years ago moved into his current Northern Audio dealership, where he offers components from Technics, Dr. Feickert, Luxman, Grimm Audio, Mola Mola, Hegel, Fleetwood Sound, and Triangle, among others.

Keys to his success? Good products and good staff. "The success of any business is solely an aspect of the people who are employed who run the show," he said. "A lot of stores you go into, many people just don't have the knowledge and experience to be helpful." His employees emphasize customer service and maintain the right attitude toward customers—*all* customers. "There are other hi-fi stores where a normal person walks into the store and gets ignored," he said. "To me, it doesn't matter if you're spending $100 or $100,000. You're my customer, and you're going to get treated the same. I don't look down on anybody."

What about the future? He sees all three businesses continuing as long as he is able to retain his staff: "As long as I continue to have the help and support and knowledge and expertise of my staff, the train's gonna stay on the tracks."

It depends on one other thing: Those longtime customers won't be around forever. He knows this. "I think the most important part of our business is to continue to engage and educate the younger generation about the quality of record pressings and the quality of turntables and audio gear and offer more ways to allow them to enjoy listening to the music they listen to in their lives day to day." He's counting on drawing them in and keeping them coming back for more.

"I love retail. I love customer interactions. I love coming up with solutions to help customers fulfill needs." *All* customers. Service with a smile. "This is what I've done my entire life," he says. "'Tell me what it is you're looking for.'" ■

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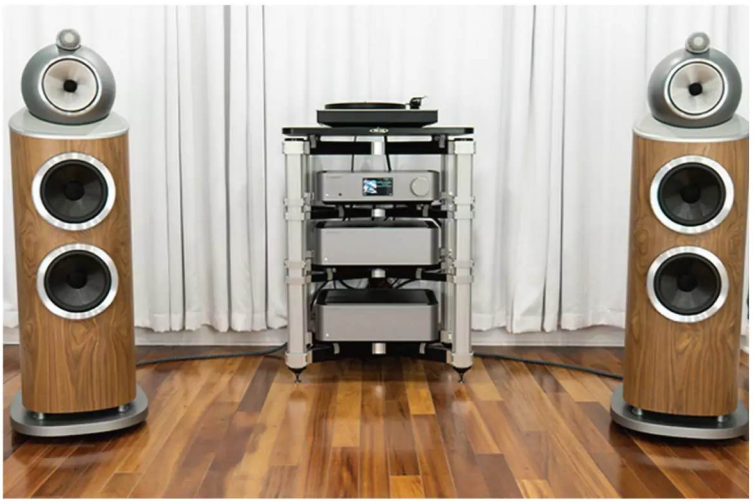

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MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

THIS ISSUE: Representatives of Voxativ, Octave Audio, Triode Lab, and Eversolo respond to our reviews of their products.

Voxativ Ampeggio 2024

We at Voxativ in Berlin are deeply grateful to Ken and JA for their perceptive review of our reborn Ampeggio in *Stereophile* (Vol.47 No.6). Their meticulous exploration and nuanced portrayal of the listening experience encapsulate the essence of our ongoing 15-year endeavor. Would we be here today if it weren't for Art Dudley's first review?

Ken's tribute to Art beautifully links the heritage of our original design to the innovations in the new Ampeggio, highlighting the evolution of our philosophy. His remarks on the speaker's pitch certainty, dynamic range, and emotional impact echo our mission to create handcrafted designs that can convey the pure emotional essence of the music. The review's focus on the technical enhancements of the new Ampeggio—including the optimized cabinet, redesigned support system, and the choice of full-range drivers—reflects our stubborn pursuit of nuanced perfection. We are thrilled that the fruits of our labor, aimed at refining design and engineering, were so perceptively acknowledged.

Ken's account of Voxativ's design ethos offers insight into the pure passion driving our company. Our commitment to true-to-life sound, as evidenced by the AST technology and refined driver and cabinet design, aims to deliver a pure listening experience.

Our heartfelt thanks go to *Stereophile* for highlighting the new Ampeggio's objective and subjective achievements, which align with our vision of always being different.

Inès Adler
Voxativ

Octave Audio MRE 220 SE

On behalf of Andreas Hofmann and Octave Audio, we thank *Stereophile* and Jason Victor Serinus for a fabulous review of the new Octave MRE 220 SE mono amplifiers. Octave has been building tube amplifiers for well over 35 years, consistently delivering models that perform with unique stability and unwavering musicality even with loudspeakers not generally prescribed for use with tubes. The company achieves this by founding its designs exclusively on the use of bespoke and specially selected premium-quality components, forward-thinking circuits, and never cutting corners. The Octave design approach and

technologies marry the venerable tube with modern electronics to ensure the tubes can realize their full sonic potential, always with an eye toward safety and longevity. All of this is tied to a commitment to manufacture in Germany, with meticulous handcraftsmanship.

These promises would be worth nothing if the products didn't deliver. Octave states on its website that "Music is not just about precise highs, mids, and bass, but about the fun, the emotion in the music that makes the soul vibrate." It seems Jason experienced just that feeling with the MRE 220 SEs, declaring that "their beauty of sound and ability to communicate music's transformative essence won out over other considerations." We agree with Jason wholeheartedly, particularly when he added that there is a "palpable yet paradoxically intangible truth to the sound of the Octave MRE 220 SE mono" that makes them "easy on the ear, satisfying to mind and body, capable of reaching into music's heart and sharing it with all who listen." We don't think we need to say more, except to again offer a sincere thanks to everyone at *Stereophile* for communicating the essence of the Octave MRE 220 SE mono amplifiers to your readers.

Mike Manousselis and John Quick
Dynaudio North America

Triode Lab 2A3 EVO

We want to thank *Stereophile* for the excellent review; it's truly an honor for us. Ken has eloquently captured the essence of what we aim to do: connect listeners with their music in a deeper way. That's what keeps us striving each day—to tap into the magic that exists between performer and audience—and receiving feedback here in *Stereophile* is most gratifying for us. To that end, we will continue to design and manufacture high-quality triode tube amplifiers and to share this sound art with the audio community.

We regret that one of the supplied preamp tubes was not working as it should during John Atkinson's measurements; we think this may have occurred during transit.

Frank Ng, Noam Bronstein
Triode Lab, Finalé Audio

Eversolo DMP-A8

We're delighted to learn that Rogier enjoyed the DMP-A8 and that the measured results are satisfactory. At Eversolo, our philosophy is rooted in ensuring the ultimate fidelity in sound reproduction, while providing a better interactive experience, continuous functional improvements, and the expansion of the music streaming content ecosystem.

It's great that Rogier, like us, pays attention to details. Many users have also suggested enlarging the font on the touchscreen. By swiping left on the music playback interface now, you can switch between different themes. In one theme, the track name, album, and artist can easily be seen from 3' away.

While Eversolo may still be considered a relatively young brand in the audio realm, our core team possesses substantial research and development capabilities and boasts years of experience in the technology and hi-fi industries. We are committed to pursuing innovation and excellence while remaining receptive to customer feedback, all with the aim of providing users with an outstanding audio experience and a more user-friendly interface.

When a user experiences simple joy in life because of our products, we can confidently say, "Yes, that is what aligns with our aspirations."

The Eversolo Team

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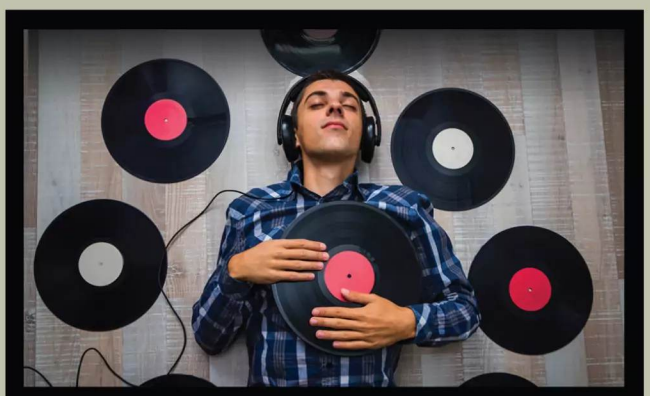
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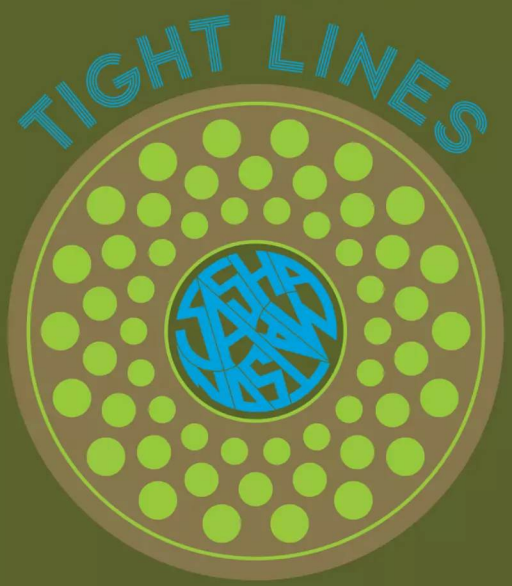

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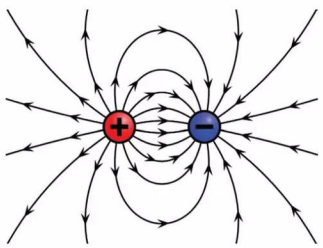

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Image courtesy Geek3

MY BACK PAGES

BY JAY FERRARI

THIS ISSUE: A return to vinyl, music, and all the very best stuff.

My triumphant return to vinyl

I recently started buying records again after a 30-year hiatus, thanks to my youngest daughter. She was 9, and I was gutting it out through the implosion of my first marriage. I was invigorated by the challenge of outfitting a new apartment on the cheap. I'd walk the aisles of Value Village in search of serviceable kitchen gear, and she loved to come with me, sifting through used books and house dresses while I assessed the quality of a skillet or stovetop percolator. She'd leave wrapped in threadbare pastel, cradling an armful of books by Lemony Snicket and Geronimo Stilton.

One afternoon, as we passed a stack of George Foreman Grills, she saw the record player, a mottled beige-brown box familiar to any Gen-X kid who spent time in their elementary school library. It had the reinforced metal corners and industrial clasps of a steamer trunk and a thick green handle made of indestructible Cold War plastic. Written across the top in black marker: #0027. How this piece of surplus ended up in the wayward-housewares section of a suburban thrift shop was surely an interesting story but not my concern. There it was, shut tight and resolute, perhaps since the 1970s. The price: $8.

"Dad!" she gasped, "Check this out! I thought it was a suitcase!"

She had thumbed back the silver clasps holding it together to inspect the turntable and tonearm. "You said you used to have a record player, right?"

Her question was transportive. I had had record players, or access to record players, since I could remember—first a bright orange and blue one made by, what, Mattel? Fisher-Price? I had a shoebox of my dad's old 45s and played Bill Haley's "See You Later, Alligator," Chuck Berry's "Maybellene," and the Beatles' "She Loves You" again and again and again.

My dad had what was at the time a solid home system: Giant (to me) Jensen speakers, a beastly Kenwood receiver with mesmerizing meters, and a thick-sided Fisher automatic turntable that dropped records down on the platter with satisfying mechanical authority. I remember stacking the *White Album* on the record-changer turntable to play in the proper sequence because sides 1 and 2, and thus 3 and 4, were on separate LPs.

Sometime in junior high, I got my own system, a Sanyo JX 4404, which combined a receiver, turntable, and cassette deck on the footprint of a large pizza box. This was the platform from which my love of music and appreciation for decent audio gear was launched.

My daughter's question slapped me back 45 years, to sitting on shag carpet scalloped with Zeppelin, Rush, and Yes, the Sanyo in front of me, a sunken-chest geek endlessly flipping sides, lost in liner notes, making clumsy mixtapes for girls he was too scared to talk to.

Thanks again to a musically minded father, I had already amassed (or more accurately could plunder at will) a fantastic record collection. The treasures included that *White Album*, a first pressing that still had the headshots! There were first pressings of *Are You Experienced*, *Willy and the Poor Boys*, and more. There was plenty of Frank Sinatra, along with Bob Willis,

Teaching her to play air guitar to "My Sharona" was alone worth the price.

Willie Nelson, Cat Stevens, Crosby, Stills & Nash, and of course Steely Dan. Blue Note, Motown, Stax, and Atlantic were also well-represented. I absorbed it all and augmented it with summer-job pocket money, walking to the nearby mall at least once a week to hit the arcade, Orange Julius, and record store in that order. I never walked home without an album under my arm.

The collection grew quickly and steadily until I left for college. By then, the world was converting to Compact Disc, and I followed, moving like so many to the new, crackle-free format. In my 20s, with fresh discretionary income, I amassed piles of silver discs and built my own system. The biggest splurge was an elegantly imposing pair of Polk Audio LS70s that would enchant me and infuriate neighbors for a decade.

Then, for reasons intricate and unhealthy, I fell into a marriage that did not condone compulsive music acquisition, regardless of format. LPs were sold to astonished collectors. CDs were boxed and stacked in a damp basement corner. Components and speakers were relegated to the attic with the empty promise that one day they might fit into an interior decorating scheme that would never come together.

Fast-forward a decade, then another. There's my daughter and that school-library record player serving up a crazy combination of emotions: nostalgia for my lost collection, pride in her observant nature, anger at circumstances that let a stack of good gear gather dust and a massive amount of music get sold off or sequestered.

I bought the turntable, of course. My beaming daughter carried it out of the thrift store. I assured her we'd hunt up some records right away. The next day I found a milk crate full of random '70s and '80s LPs on Craigslist for $50. Teaching her to play air guitar to "My Sharona" was alone worth the price. Then the renewal really took hold.

Within a few weeks, I'd bought a rebuilt Sugden turntable and mounted its beautiful wood plinth on squash balls. I bought a used Rotel integrated amplifier. I spirited that pair of LS70s from the attic and brought everything together on cinder blocks and milk crates in the living room of the new apartment. The sound was glorious, liberating, and rejuvenating.

I've since returned to the record shops—those that remain—and upgraded the turntable with a Grace 707 tonearm and Sumiko Blue Point cartridge. Each tweak brought a bigger smile to my face. I'm now on the hunt for new speakers. Meanwhile, I'm reliving those long afternoons in my room nearly 45 years ago, lost in *Physical Graffiti* or *Permanent Waves*, my face set with the same smile (though I know my face doesn't look the same), my mind in the same place of engaged ease.

All this because my daughter spotted a piece of once-ubiquitous audio equipment and because of her seemingly innate, perhaps inherited sense of how music can impact who you are and who you can become. It's a feeling I loved and let slip away. I can never thank her enough for bringing it back. ■

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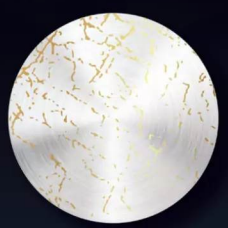

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